

Chapter 1

//NAME: VASSAGO AEIDER

//CIN: 180-65-3564

//AGE: 20

//SEX: MALE

...

//CMD: INITIALIZE PLAYBACK

Fear has ruled my life almost as much as money. Not because I ever wanted wealth, but because on the streets, fear and money are what keep me alive—the true goal of every humanoid on Kiral, stretching back to the days when we still had fins instead of feet.

My feet carried me to a Magitech warehouse in the outskirts of the city, chasing money—and survival. A billion-coin company wouldn't miss a few documents or prototypes, right? I crept across the deserted, poorly lit parking lot outside the colossal warehouse, my heart hammering in my throat. Ducking from truck to truck, slipping past the sweep of spell-lights, I leaned on years of street-honed stealth. The snow betrayed me, every crunch beneath my ragged shoes echoing too loudly in my ears. And the icy wind cut through my gray hoodie, finding gaps in the cloth.

Crouched by the front wheel of a parked Druathane truck, I sat ten or twenty feet from a warehouse door. Shoving my hands deep into the torn pockets of my jeans, I settled in to wait. Every entrance here had a card reader, and I wasn't bold enough to risk the roof, so this door was my only chance. I'd cased the place for several nights, and someone always left through it eventually. The only question was how long I'd be stuck here—minutes or hours.

A crow dropped from the sky and landed a short distance away. It lowered its head to a small carcass, tearing into it with sharp, deliberate jabs. Most people saw only filth and cowardice in birds like that—harbingers of death, scavengers too weak to kill for themselves. I didn't. To me, they were survivors. Fiercer than rats, cunning enough to never waste strength on a fight they couldn't win.

Pale organs glistening under the spell lights, I watched as the crow ripped a wet strand of viscera free. Then its head turned, one unblinking eye fixing on me. The message was clear enough: when I fall, it'll be waiting. And could I blame it? I would do the same. In the end, survival wasn't moral.

Hours dragged by. The last tenth of the year showed me no mercy, the dead of night biting deep. I shivered, breath hissing out between chattering teeth as I fought to stay awake. I'd survived worse—nights spent in condemned buildings after the Vizier rolled out its so-called *anti-homeless* architecture—but three nights in a row tracking patrols had worn me thin.

The sharp click of a doorknob and the scrape of a deadbolt jolted me alert. I crouched lower, peering beneath the truck to follow the guard's legs. Usually, anyone leaving went straight to their car, shift done—that's what I expected him to do. But not this one. He turned toward the truck I was hiding behind, cutting off any chance of a dash for the door.

His voice carried clearer as he drew closer, undoubtedly speaking into his message stone.

"Yeah... I know, I'm working on it."

If the truck backed away, I'd be exposed in its headlights. My hand plunged into its aether engine. Stripping cars for parts was another thing I did on the side, and it gave me enough know how to sabotage this one. Luck was with me—an older Druathane model, with no casing. My fingers slid through a nest of steel tubes, searching blind until they found the fragile bundle.

Above me, the guard stopped at the driver's door.

"And why can't this wait for the morning shift? This isn't my job, Alkear."

The hinges groaned as he opened the door. I readied to pull down on the tubing, every nerve on edge. When the door slammed shut I yanked down hard, the pipes straining, then gave way with a sharp snap.

The ignition turned, and the engine sputtered weakly—choking on the aether bleeding from its broken manifold. It coughed once, twice, but never caught.

"Fuck's sake," he muttered, the words muffled through the glass windows.

The door swung open again and he stepped out, his boots crunching across the snow as he complained under his breath. Each step brought him closer to the warehouse, and my chest tightened with the rhythm of my pounding heart. It was now or never.

"It's too damn cold out here, and the truck won't start! Get a mechanic in the morning," he barked into his shoulder where the messaging stone sat under his coat.

The truck that had been my haven was left behind as I slid out and fell in behind him, close enough to shadow but far enough to stay unseen, fingers gripping the broken coin card in my pocket. He slapped his access card against the reader, yanked the door open, and stepped inside.

As the door swung closed, I broke into a frantic run, almost slamming into the door frame. The moment before it swung shut, I slipped my coin card into the gap, wedging it against the bolt before it could lock.

A sigh of relief left my lips, frosted by the chill. I waited a few seconds for the guard to walk away before opening it slowly, peeking in from the crack in the frame. A dark, empty hallway was on

the other side, light bleeding in from a few of the doors that flanked the walkway. I opened it carefully, stepped inside and closed it, making sure the card kept it from locking.

With my hood up and mask on, the divination network couldn't pin me down. I'd be gone before they realized anything was wrong.

Through the silent halls, I stepped with my heels lowering first, weight rolling onto my toes to keep the echo of footsteps from carrying through the empty building. Del promised that important people would pay handsomely for whatever documents I pulled from this warehouse, and when he named the price, it outweighed any fear of being caught. Survival had its own math.

The hall opened into tall windows that rose from my hip to the ceiling, granting a sweeping view of the warehouse floor. Towering shelves loaded with boxes—some sturdy steel, others little more than cardboard—stretched into the distance. My gaze climbed higher, past the scaffolding that spanned the vast space, until it found the office perched above. And there it was: a bright, glass-fronted box where the guard I'd sabotaged slumped in a chair, pouring his grievances onto his colleague that didn't wear a coat like he did. I felt a flicker of gratitude—his whining kept their eyes and minds well away from the orb feed.

The guards had to find their way out of the security office before I could ransack it. Damaging a scrying orb might lure one away, but it wouldn't get both. I wasn't a tech wiz, but I could always flip the breaker to shut the network down—though I'd still have to deal with any backup generators. If the streets had taught me anything, it's that breaking shit was way easier than fixing it. If I pulled some of the servers off the racks they would probably have to get the IT guy on call.

With the wall-mounted signs to guide me I found the server room, and as expected, found it locked. From beneath my hoodie, I drew the most expensive thing I owned—a slim set of lockpicks. I wasn't a professional, but most interior door locks were cheap and uninspired. With a pick in one hand, and tension bar in the other, I knelt to the three-tumbler lock and prayed to the White Gods that the coated guard wouldn't run out of complaints anytime soon. Every tick of the clock made my grip tremble, my hands slick with nerves, until the sweetest sound cut through the silence: a soft click, the door yielding to me.

The door revealed rows of racks humming softly in the dark, each lined with servers pulsing steady green and amber. The air was cool, tinged with ozone and the faint tang of dust. I slid inside like water spilling through a crack, closing the door with the barest whisper.

The first rack stood to my left, cables hanging like veins. I put my foot low on the rack, gripped the cold metal, and yanked. The frame groaned before the server came loose, the sound of snapping cables sharp as breaking twigs. They'd know something was wrong soon enough, but with luck, the first place they'd check wouldn't be the security office.

One by one, I moved down the aisle, the work rhythmic and deliberate, each tug pulled another machine into limp silence. Then I found the rack for the server room itself. This one I left untouched. I could track the guards later on through the divination network if I left it working.

Back into the hall I flowed toward the warehouse floor, keeping low and quick. The office wasn't far, and I could just make out movement—footsteps, muted voices. I waited, breath held, until the scrape of a chair and the hiss of a door opening told me they were finally on the move.

"What, you think someone fucked with the servers?" the coated guard said to his uncoated counterpart.

"It's hard to tell with how dark it is in the room, but none of the lights are blinking on any of the servers, it can't be a coincidence they all went down at once," The uncoated guard replied walking down the stairs.

"And you need me for?" The coated guard retorted.

"Cover, in case it's sabotage and whoever did it comes back while I fix the system."

The two of them walked off before I could hear the rest of the conversation, but it was just my luck that the IT guy was on duty tonight instead of on call.

Hands on the railing of the scaffold stairway I threw myself up and tried the door handle. Locked. Damn him for being thorough. Still, the frame left just enough of a gap for me to glimpse the bolt. No deadbolt—good.

Once again fishing around inside my hoodie I pulled out my pick set and got to work. This lock was the same three tumbler as the other door, and probably using the same key. It only took me a second or two to get it open.

The office was dominated by a six-monitor setup cycling through different scrying orbs on the divination network. One screen remained fixed on the employee database. Smart enough to lock the door—lazy enough to leave the system logged in.

The chair creaked under me, eyes darting to the orb feed that tracked the guards. They had turned the lights on and the IT guard was plugging them back in one at a time while the coated guard watched the hall. They knew someone was here, now.

Turning back to the database, I felt my stomach knot. Del hadn't been clear on what his client wanted, so anything that looked important would have to do. I navigated quickly, each click punctuated by nervous glances at the network screens. The closer the guards came to finishing their cleanup, the tighter the fear clawed at my throat.

Then I found a tab labeled *special inventory*. I wasn't sure this is what I was looking for, but it felt the least wrong. Anything listed under special had to be important right?

The data was a wall of abbreviations and serial numbers—dense, unreadable. Each entry opened to a picture and a short paragraph, but I didn't have time to sift through thousands. The IT guard moved with practiced proficiency plugging each server back in.

On the hunt for anomalies, I scanned the database. Then I found entries without serial numbers.

When opened it had no pictures. Just text. Kenic, packed with scientific jargon: *paraphysial noosphere tap... divine cartographic pulser*.

Burner phone in hand I snapped pictures as fast as my hand would move.

A glance at the scrying feed—empty. The guards were gone.

"Fuck."

In a panic I scrolled for a log—arrival dates, destinations, anything. Voices echoed closer.

No time. I snapped the screen, shoved the phone away, and bolted from the chair.

Down the stairs, two steps at a time, just before the guards rounded the corner. I slid into the shadows as the IT guard climbed.

"I thought I locked this," he muttered, spotting the door ajar.

"Maybe you forgot," the coated guard said.

"No. I definitely locked it." His voice hardened as he pushed into the office.

As I eased back toward the exit the guard scanned the now operational monitors. His eyes widened, snapping straight to where I crouched.

"Fuck—he's right there!"

He didn't bother elaborating to Coated Guard. He bolted from the chair and thundered down the stairs toward me.

"Shit, shit, shit." I spun, slammed through the door, and tore down the hallway.

Both followed, yellow arc casters flashing in their hands.

"Stop or we'll fire!" IT Guard barked.

The halls twisted, every turn a dead end waiting to happen. I sprinted to a T-intersection—and froze. A third guard blocked the path. His arc caster came up, aimed square at me.

He fired without a word. A streak of blue light split the air, like a smear of lightning across glass. It wouldn't kill me, but it would hurt like hell.

A window shattered as I hurled myself through it and landed on the warehouse floor. The arc screaming past, sizzling, close enough to burn. My rough landing knocked the wind out of me, costing precious seconds.

After a hard fought breath I scrambled to my feet, behind me IT Guard roared.
“You fucking idiot! You hit Vallery!”

Neither of them spared a second more for Vallery as they vaulted through the shattered window. I needed a fire exit. Now.

Using the shelves as cover I shoved boxes over as I ran. Crashes thundered behind me, slowing pursuit. Then—red door. Salvation. I burst through it, hope flaring—

A Warden patrol car screeched into the lot, lights flaring.

“Please don’t be Del. Please don’t be Del.” The prayer was silent, frantic, useless.

Two Wardens stepped out. Shadow made flesh—caps marked with a red six-pointed star, faces hidden by mesh masks reinforced with hard plastic. Amber scarves broke the void of dark blue synththread windbreakers stretched tight under camo plate carriers stuffed with black ammo pouches. Cargo pants strapped with holsters, knees padded, tucked into black-and-grey boots. Not sentinels. Soldiers.

“Vassago!” The male Warden’s voice rolled across the lot, deep and commanding.

Del’s voice—of course. He must have been waiting for the call. How else could my luck sink low enough that he’d be the one to show up here?

Mid-stride I halted. Behind me, the guards closed in, arc casters leveled at my back.

“Get on the ground!” IT Guard barked.

My gaze darted from the two of them and back to Del and his partner, Shara.

If I were fresh, I could make it out of this without a scratch. But after the chase, lungs seared and legs dead, I wasn’t outrunning anyone. And they knew it. They never liked it when I ran.

Ice coiled around my nose as I exhaled, and dropped to my knees. Hands laced behind my head. The guards swarmed me.

My face hit the snowy pavement, cold and wet biting into my skin, leeching warmth by the second. Third wheel—my impromptu name for the third guard—drove a knee between my shoulders, pinning me down as Del and Shara closed the distance.

“Silent alarm went off. We came as fast as we could.” Del’s eyes cut down at me, full of disdain.

“Thank you, Wardens,” IT Guard said. “He’s a slippery son of a bitch.”

“Not so slick now, huh?” Third Wheel sneered. He pressed his arc caster into my ribs.

White-hot fire tore through me. My scream ripped free before I could swallow it down, nerves flayed raw under the surge. When the weapon lifted, I gasped against the snow, his knee grinding into my spine.

“I’ve always admired what you do for the city,” IT Guard said eagerly. “I want to join one day, could you maybe give me some pointers?”

“Is it really the time for this, Alkear?” Third Wheel snapped.

Shara’s gaze was cold steel as it cut over me. “We can handle it from here.”

Alkear flushed, stammering. “Of course, ma’am. My apologies.”

Third Wheel pressed the caster to me again. Another jolt—my body went rigid, fire clawing up my arms, neck, and spine. My teeth clamped down on a scream that tore through my throat.

“Don’t give the pretty lady any trouble,” he hissed.

Then he hauled me upright while Shara cuffed my wrists.

“Can you take him to the car?” Del asked, hands on his hips. “I’ll get the statement from these guys.”

Shara nodded, hauled me up, and dragged me toward the squad car. Soaked through, fried twice at point-blank, and now under arrest—hell of a night. The only comfort came from the car’s spell heater, the first warmth I’d felt since the last time Del and Shara dragged me in.

She slid into the front passenger seat and murmured a command word in Waric. The scrying orb dimmed, its symbols fading into nothing. I didn’t understand a lick of the language—soldiers’ speech, mercenaries’ tongue. Supposedly easy to learn, but food had always been more important to me than being bilingual.

“Did you really have to let him shock me twice?” I asked, pain throbbing in my ribs.

Shara pulled a laptop onto her knees and glanced back through the partition. “I still remember the hell you gave us a few weeks ago. Family in the Grey Quarter—you could’ve made it easy with a few words.”

She turned forward again, screen glow painting her mask. “Three hours. That’s how long you dragged it out, Vassago.”

A short, bitter huff found its way out of me. “Then let’s get on with it.”

“Not today.” Her fingers rattled across the keys, deliberate and steady. “Del didn’t send you on this at random. A higher-up wanted you here.”

“So no slap on the wrist and back on the streets the next day to keep doing your dirty work?”

Shara, still typing, retorted, “They wanted you arrested and knew we’d been feeding you jobs like this.” A tang of bitterness in her voice. “Threatened us if we didn’t bring you in.”

“Who?” I moved closer to the partition, voice sharper than I meant it to be.

Her typing slowed. Stuttered. Then stopped.

Silence stretched between us, filled only by the hum of the heater and the muffled voices outside.

She exhaled through her mask, long and irritated, as if scolding herself for what she was about to say. The laptop closed with a soft click.

Turning in her seat, she leaned an elbow against the headrest, her hat and mask casting deep shadows across her face. For a moment, she only stared at me. Her amber eyes caught the dim light and seemed to cut through it, sharper and sharper the longer the silence dragged on.

Finally, her voice dropped low, deliberate—like the word itself weighed a ton.

“The Arbiter.”

//RSP: PLAYBACK TERMINATED

Chapter 2

~Answer us you bitch!

A ghost from my visions grabbed my mind.

You will answer us Faith!~

As a powerful Soothsayer, visions are what gave me power, but I was also what would kill me. Unlike others of my profession, I was far *far* more powerful than them. I saw into the future, past, and present all at once in too many variations to count. Flashes of steel, the snap of gunfire, voices shouting over each other in a dozen tongues crashed through my skull. The blur of color and motion folded together until sleep and wakefulness were the same thing, one relentless torrent of noise and light hammering at the edges of my mind.

I relived moments an endless number of times, each iteration twisted just slightly, while the future shattered into countless variations pressing against me. Closing my eyes only made it worse, the flood dragging me further from reality until the weight of possibility threatened to drown me.

Every repetition cut deeper. I couldn't tell how many times I'd already dressed that morning, or how often I'd feigned the same introduction with a wide-eyed recruit, repeating answers to the same dull questions. Once, sex had blurred the edges of my visions—the tender brush of skin, the heat of bodies pressed close, the thrill of defiling something sacred. But the future stretched too far ahead. By the time I met someone new, I had already slept with them a thousand times, and the act carried nothing but the weight of inevitability.

Only a few things could keep me tethered to the now. The silver shades dulled the constant flicker of visions, and the scrubbers in the Tower swallowed enough of the background noise to let me pretend at psychic silence, otherwise I would rip Tower apart. But it was pain—always pain—that cut through the fog.

I could see it in the future now, the coming pain. The closer my future of battle got to the present the less visions of the far flung past present or future gave way to real life.

Slowly three men faded into reality, each a head taller, broad-shouldered, encased in riot gear they thought might protect them. Batons gripped tight, knuckles pale with tension. I had no steel, no weapon but my hands—and a countless visions of pain.

A long drawn out breath spilled into my lungs. It stank of their fear, sharp and minty, and it made me smile. I was in a sparring arena, one I had been in a million times. I didn't know when I had gotten here, but I knew I was allowed to hurt people in the ring, so I leaned into it.

"Well, boys," I said, planting my hands on my hips, shifting my weight onto one leg. "Don't keep a lady waiting."

The smile stretched across my perfect teeth, malice burning behind the silvered lenses of my shades. Was this a vision? It didn't matter, the savagery to come would make it real.

The one on my right charged first, like in so many repetitions before this. Brave, young, and new to the Wardens, he moved without hesitation. The fresh ones always fought best—too ignorant to feel fear yet. I saw a vision of his baton in a vertical arc, aiming to rap the top of my head like a drum. The crack of bone, the wash of blood—it would've been a kind of relief. But the futures that flickered past told me of months wasted in a hospital bed. God, that would be unbearable.

My hand shot up and caught the blow. It jarred through me, the metal biting into flesh. I felt the skin split under the impact, a bright sting blooming across my hand, bones rattling like thin glass.

"A for effort," I hissed. My hand slipped under his helmet's visor and I grabbed the mesh mask under it pulling his helmeted head into my knee. The pain in his head echoed in my mind, a bolt of pain ripped up my leg, knifing through my joint. I could feel the pain of others because of the involuntary mind reading, just less potently than my own. The boy stumbled back, dazed, and I caught his visor, flipping it up.

Terror colored his features under his now ruined mask, but before I could bite his nose off, the other two started their attack. Damn, I almost got too caught up in the moment to predict their moves.

These two had fought me several times already in the ring, but my visions outstripped any experience they gained from training. Even without a single win, they'd improved at fighting me significantly. That alone made things a little more interesting. Two sides at once, one high, one low, both rushing forward. They couldn't hope to catch me off guard, but they could try to make dodging impossible. They still failed to grasp that I didn't particularly care about getting hit—in fact, I preferred it as long as it didn't damage my brain because it would make it easier to discern the tangible world.

My arm flew up to meet the high strike. The baton slammed against my forearm, a bone-deep shock that sent hot needles up to my elbow. At the same time, my shin snapped up to block the low. The collision lit a fire down my leg, a sharp jolt that burned across my tibial nerve. My teeth clenched, breath hissed through them. Immediately it became clear this wasn't a vision of the future, but finally after so many repetitions, this was the real deal. I laughed despite the pain.

"Good hit, boys!" Excitement bled into my voice.

My leg that caught the low attack twisted and struck out like a cobra, boot slamming into his helmet. Pain detonated in my ankle, a flare that made my vision white at the edges, but his head rocked back and he crumpled the ringing in his head traveling to mine.

The other veteran that had attacked lunged, arms wrapping tight around my waist, dragging me down. The mat rushed up to meet us, every bruise singing like struck iron.

“Handsy!” I barked, mocking him as we hit the ground. I ripped his helmet free—easy, since they’d left the straps loose after I nearly decapitated an old sparring partner.

Like a hammer, I brought it down twice on his skull before he let go.

The younger Warden lunged in, baton swinging. I caught it as I had before, spun, and coiled my legs around his arm. His training kept him from releasing the weapon, but my lower body strength flung us to the ground. A wrench tore the baton from his grip.

The veteran Warden who still had his helmet swung at me from above, a horizontal strike aimed at the arm now holding my prize. I blocked, but the clash kept me from finishing the boy with it. My hand would have to do. How unfortunate for him.

Magic could regenerate eyes, so taking them here was fair game. My nails dug deep into his hazel orbs. His screams filled the room, raw and jagged, and drove the two veterans into reckless action.

They flew at me swinging wildly as they abandoned any plan they may have had. The Warden whose helmet I ripped off came in with a blow that slammed into my ribs, a crack splitting through bone, but I took it. The other veteran’s blow I caught with my stolen baton. My free hand latched onto the striker’s wrist, dragging him close.

“Finally!” I drove my knee into the Warden’s groin hard enough to lift him off his feet for a split second. Cup or not, it hurt, the branches of our shared pain rooting me harder in the real world and forcing the visions back.

With the Warden still reeling from my attack I slipped around him, using him as a shield from his unhelmeted comrade. Reaching past my shield with my baton, I flipped his visor up. The helmetless Warden already knew what was coming and swung, but I spun like a dancer, diagonal strike meeting his. My baton parried his overhead strike and crashed down across the face of the veteran I’d just hit in the dick, ending his part in the fight.

That left only me and the helmetless one.

“You’re only the last one standing in two of my visions,” I told him, resting the baton on my shoulder. “You should be proud.”

He didn’t answer. He just rushed me, baton angled for my ribs. I let him. Pain lanced fire through my side, but it made me feel alive—more alive than I’d felt in months. When he tried to pull away, I trapped his weapon under my arm, leaving his head wide open.

My strike tore flesh from his cheek, teeth scattering across the mat. He staggered, but I caught his wrist and held him. Another blow—his jaw crumpled, blood spraying across the floor.

My third strike came in with a predatory arch—

“End ex.” The intercom crackled with a man’s voice from the roof.

Excitement drained; wrath flooded back in. Just like that, the fun ended and unreality started seeping in through the cracks in my mind. The pain in my arm, ribs, and knee gave me control of my powers for now and would keep the worst at bay for a few days.

The Warden collapsed to the floor as I let him fall.

“Acceptable performance without using psychic abilities,” the voice over the intercom droned. “Still below the requested improvement for the month.”

My golden eyes cast my sight down at the Warden’s ruined face. “Do you find my performance lacking?” I drew from the well of visions for his name—I never remembered otherwise. “Taylor?”

He rolled onto his side, spitting blood and teeth onto the mat. “Nur... mahme,” he slurred through a broken jaw. Admirable in its way.

Taylor forced himself upright, as the other veteran Warden pulled the eyeless recruit to his feet beside him.

“Arkanthos, Faith. You could have gone easier on the new blood.” Another dip into the well gave me his name—Ackeron. Gods. A name dragged out of the Codex.

“Ackeron,” I said with a thin smile, though no joy lingered from the fight. Only anger now, simmering low, steady. “Next time, I’ll take your eyes.”

Taylor gripped his jaw, braced, and snapped it back into place with a sickening crack.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “I’m a firearms expert, not a superhero.”

He worked his bloody fingers into his mouth, plucking out a loose tooth as the cleric hurried over. Another recruit, by the looks of it. They always sent the green ones here—practice where the odds of dying were lower.

She mishandled the Way Lines, forcing the flow instead of guiding it. Crude. Inefficient. Like trying to redirect a river with two planks. Still—credit where it’s due. It would heal him. Slowly. Painfully.

For a moment, I considered asking her to tend me as well. The pain appealed. But the thought soured. As soon as she finished the pain would disappear, and so would my grasp on reality.

“Faith.” A Warden in full gear stood at the arena exit, arms crossed, staring me down like his glare might frighten me.

“Gabriel.” I didn’t need a vision to remember his name. The lieutenant worked hard to keep himself at the top of my list. The day he stepped into the ring would be a day worth savoring.

“Fix your rib,” he ordered, eyes flicking to my side. He always noticed when I tried to hide an injury. “I can live with the arm and knee, but I won’t risk a punctured lung.”

Dealing with Gabriel grated on me. Indifference—that’s all he ever gave me. He cared about my health only when it threatened performance. I’d never once caught fear or desire from him in the Way Lines.

Knowing there’s no version of the future where I win here a grumble escaped my throat.

The young cleric approached, laying tentative hands on my side. I stood tall—even for a woman—and I had a way of making others blush under my gaze. This one was no different. In a thousand visions I’d already stripped her bare, and in a heartbeat I’d become bored of her.

Her healing, though, held my attention. It burned. The Way Lines pulled rough and jagged, forcing the flesh to knit instead of coaxing it.

A wicked smile painted itself on my face. Her cheeks deepened in color.

“Hey, coach!” I called out to the ceiling.

“Yes, Faith.” The voice over the intercom sounded faintly amused. “She’ll be working with us for some months. I thought you might appreciate her.”

When the cleric finished, I leaned close to her ear. My whisper was almost gentle. “When you heal—tug hard at the tough places.”

“Faith.” Gabriel’s command cut in before I could feed the cleric more bad advice.

“Coming, coming.” I waved him off with a limp hand, dismissing his irritation.

The arena doors opened silently as I passed through into the curving hallway, the lieutenant’s footsteps close behind. The walkway circled the Tower’s outer wall, its spell-forged glass giving a sweeping view of Valago’s crown jewel. The Hall rose beyond us, a ziggurat that scraped the clouds, the so-called heart of the city.

At its base, four Towers anchored each corner, each a bastion for one of Valago’s ruling branches. This was the Warden Tower. Above, the ziggurat’s grey steel bulk gave way to a palace of white marble perched like a parasite, gold and silver dripping from its columns. Even at this distance, Mithril statues of Vizier icons stared down like gods carved into permanence. A monument to greed.

“Walk with me,” Gabriel said, his voice souring the view.

“Please, Gabriel—” I began.

“Lieutenant,” he corrected, clipped.

Rage sparked behind my eyes, so hot even my silver rimmed spell forged sunglasses couldn't bury it.

"Lieutenant," I hissed through clenched teeth. "I don't feel like walking anywhere with you."

"That's unfortunate." His gaze never left The Hall. "It isn't a request."

The storm of my anger and visions broke open. Futures cascaded before me in a riot of colors and sensations, grotesque blossoms unfurling one after another.

I saw my thumb rammed through the soft of his throat, feeling cartilage tear and collapse beneath it as his windpipe folded shut. I saw my fist drive into his mouth, teeth snapping loose, blood spilling hot across my knuckles. I clawed his tongue out by the root, ripping it free in a spray of spit and gore. In one thread, I bent his head back and split his jaw down the middle like rotten wood. In another, I crushed his eyes into paste with my thumbs, his skull jerking as nerves misfired.

Each vision of a possible future burned with exquisite detail—the smell of copper, the texture of bone giving way, the muffled choke of breath turning to nothing. A thousand violent ends, and the consequences of every one left me locked away in the dark. The isolation driving me mad and killing my soul.

The Way Line scrubbers overhead rattled to life, whirring as they scoured the air of spell-sickness. Magic poisoned the ungifted—and even weakened practitioners—so with countless mages working inside the Hall, the Savant Tower had engineered machines to bleed it away. The cost was steeper spells and dimmed visions, but for me, that hindrance was a blessing more often than not.

The indignation subsided, simmering down to an ember. My scowl stayed fixed as I swallowed the visions whole.

"Lead the way."

The two of us moved down the hall in silence. Wardens and clerks gave us a wide berth, as they always did. Good. The closer people came, the louder the visions grew—minds bleeding into mine like static, drowning thought in endless noise.

If I wanted, I could tear Gabriel's words straight from his skull. Without touch, though, it would come as a flood of fragmented nonsense. Predicting movement was simple—as in the fight—because actions left clear marks on the world. Words and the flow of information didn't. Pulling from the past was easier; it worked like enhanced recall for me rather than true mind-reading. Touch cut through the noise, making future speech or hidden knowledge sharper, but wrenching thoughts out too suddenly often ended in hemorrhage. A ritual could make it safe, though an hour-long one making it redundant.

"There is this boy," Gabriel said at last, words dropping like stones into still water.

“Congratulations, you’re a dad.” I mocked.

“If the Wardens wanted me to have a child,” he replied, glancing down at me, “they would have issued me one.”

“Then stop wasting time, *Lieutenant*.” I spat the title like a curse.

“His name is Vassago. He’ll be joining the Wardens’ special task force.”

“Good for him.” My tone was flat, already bored.

“*Your* task force,” he punctuated.

Heat flared from me in a wave. The scrubbers above hummed, straining to strip spell-sickness from the air. Who had the authority—or the idiocy—to put me in a group? And what made this *Vassago* worth the risk?

“I thought I beat it into your head that putting me in a group was a bad idea.” Fury simmered under my skin, clawing for release.

Gabriel and I stopped. So did everyone else in the hall, freezing rather than risk walking past me in the flare. Beads of sweat rolled off his face, skin reddening from the heat.

“Yes,” he said, calm as ever, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to dab the sweat at his hairline.

Gabriel stood tall and broad, even by street-Warden standards. Muscle curved under his navy office uniform, but none of it mattered. His mind was a candle in my wind.

“If it were up to me—and I’m sure you know—I’d never let you see daylight.” He folded his handkerchief with obsessive care, each crease exact, and slid it back into his pocket. “But someone far above either of us has already decided. Despite my attempts to steer them toward a sounder course.”

“Who?” My voice cut flat, almost pushing my will through the Way Lines.

He raised a hand in defense. “Not here.” His eyes swept the hall, skimming the crowd.

For a moment I almost forced him, pressing into the currents of fate—but my visions howled in warning, a storm of static. The scrubbers roared overhead, tearing at the noise before it poisoned me. Any further and they wouldn’t hold.

“Fine.” The word slipped out bitter, grudging.

He led me into a small meeting room—plastic tables, folding chairs, whiteboards stained with the ghosts of old ink. I dropped into a seat, boots hitting the table with a thunk. Gabriel stood at the front, arms clasped tight behind his back, the picture of composure.

But he didn't speak.

Seconds stretched. His jaw flexed. His shoulders shifted. He drew in a breath, slow, heavy—and let it seep out through his nose. Again. And again. Each exhale deflated him further.

"Gabriel," I snapped. "Enough stalling. Who decided this?"

His eyes closed. His hand came up to rub the bridge of his nose, then lingered there as though it could block out the question entirely.

At last, he opened his eyes. For the first time, I saw something crack through his indifference—not fear, not pity, but resignation.

"...The Arbiter."

~My visions drowned me.~

Chapter 3

```
//NAME: VASSAGO AEIDER

//CIN: 180-65-3564

//AGE: 20

//SEX: MALE

...

//ERR: UNEXPECTED HALT

...

//CMD: RESTART PLAYBACK

//ERR: DATA PURGED

...

//CMD: RECOVER DATA

//RSP: DATA PARCIAL RECOVERY

... LOADING...

//RSP: COMPLETE

//CMD: START PLAYBACK OF F2
```

The ride down the Hydrill Freeway to The Hall was as full of spectacle as ever. Exotic trees from every corner of Kiral lined the road, an untamed riot of color and form. The median of the ten-lane stretch was a parade of topiary—Wardens mid-stride, Savants in quiet pose, generic city workers immortalized in green. On either side, buildings rose high. The only thing that kept them from rising higher was the Viziers edict that no building would be taller than the Hall's palace. Even so, they were lofty enough to cast long shadows across Valago's aortic this early in the morning, their inward faces plastered with holosigns, each one a glittering demand for attention. Engineers designed the entire district to draw every eye toward the ziggurat at the highway's end—and by Ler'olen, it succeeded.

Gaze turned toward the bars separating me from the front seats, I asked, "So, did the Arbiter give you any reason for wanting me?"

Del snorted. "You think the preeminent lawwoman of Valago gives us briefings?"

Shara didn't look up, her fingers gliding over the keys of her laptop. "We didn't ask. She's not the person you question. But if I had to guess, the Board's been rounding up anyone tied to Magitech."

I leaned closer to the bars. "So this is about my parents? They've been dead for years. The only time I've touched MT since then is when you send me on jobs."

"Can't say for certain," Del said. "But the Arbiter was a major sponsor of our... less-than-legit work against MT." His shoulders stiffened. "She kept to middlemen until this latest job."

"That's surprising," I raised an eyebrow. "Every Vizier member dips their hands in scum."

"Not the Arbiter," Shara said flatly. "And whatever she wants from you, she wants it badly."

A cold knot formed in my stomach. "What does she want?"

"Like we said, we don't know," Del replied, his eyes flicking everywhere but me. "But she was willing to break the law for you and even called in Soothsayers to pin you down before coming to us."

The knot turned to fire in my chest. "Shit, guys, I don't know what this is about. But I couldn't have done anything bad enough to warrant a Soothsayer."

"Not a Soothsayer, Vassago," Shara said, glancing back at me. "A team of them. Hours in ritual."

Horror tightening around my throat, I leaned back. "Fuck."

"I don't know what she wants, V," Del said, eyes steady now on the road. "But I'd think hard about it. Someone like her taking interest in someone like you? If she doesn't get exactly what she wants—fast—you might not make the next city census."

//ERR: CORRUPT DATA

//CMD: SKIP

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

Del pulled into the Warden squad car bay at the Tower's base, a hive of motion and noise. Hundreds of Wardens moved through the tens of thousands of square feet that made up the hangar—some idling, some bent over engine bays, others doing drills with quiet precision. Massive concrete pillars held the ceiling high enough to swallow a three-story house, and bare walls showed nothing but conduit, breaker boxes, and the occasional painted emblem.

He eased the car into a space marked with a kite shield struck by a bolt of blue lightning; the vehicle settling to a stop as the aether engine wound down with a soft whine. Neither Del nor Shara moved to exit. Instead, Del twisted around to face me through the partition.

“We’ll be passing through the Precognition Floor after taking the elevator up,” he said, his tone suddenly serious. “Keep your mind clear.”

My mouth dropped into a frown. “I thought they needed a ritual.”

“Most do,” Shara said without looking up. “But some Soothsayers are powerful enough to work just by being nearby.”

Del slipped the keys from the ignition. “One of those is in the Tower now. Faber family.”

Shara got out and opened my door while Del came around the other side of the vehicle and freed my cuffs with a flick of his keyring. This all was a dance that the three of us had done a million times before. Afterwards he took the lead of my escort, as Shara fell in behind, and together we crossed the bustling bay into the Tower’s interior.

Del was the highest-ranking Warden I’d ever spoken to—a sergeant. Shara ranked below him as a corporal. Now I was being taken to the Arbiter. The position made you a noble in all but name, though it was never passed down hereditarily; too much power in one family for too long would threaten the Vizier’s dominance. She held more authority than any single person in Valago, rivaled only by a united Vizier council or by kings and self-proclaimed emperors of distant nations. To say I was on edge would be an understatement.

The lower levels were a maze of maintenance corridors, walkways, and industrial offices for the different squads. Every Warden here looked cut from the same hardened mold—the men tall and broad, the women built like blades. This was less a police precinct and more a fortress: an armed order tasked not only with enforcing the city’s laws but defending it from whatever threatened its gates.

The three of us stepped into the elevator—a bare metal box scarred by years of use. Del pressed the button for the tenth floor, and with a heavy clank from the machinery above, we began our ascent. A few slow minutes passed before a ding announced our arrival, the doors opening to a very different world.

Del was on the smaller side when it came to street Wardens, but he made up for it by having an endless well of stamina. No matter how many times I tried to evade him in the past through streets I knew like the back of my hand he just never gave up. That determination is what got him to sergeant so quickly despite being so young—younger than even Shara.

We moved into the hallway, a stark rectangle of white sheetrock and tile, sterile enough to rival a hospital. Nothing adorned the walls—no posters, no bulletin boards, not even a light switch. The silence might have been suffocating if not for the constant whir of Way Line scrubbers and the faint buzz of spell-lights overhead.

“Well,” I said, breaking the quiet, “this must be the Precognition Floor.”

“Yeah,” Del rumbled.

All I had to do was clear my mind—while scared shitless. Honestly, it might've been easier if Del had never mentioned the Precog floor, because now I couldn't stop thinking about *not* thinking of every illegal thing I'd ever done.

Even he looked uneasy, leading us through the vacant corridor, his eyes flicking to every door we passed. I was grateful for the emptiness. Soothsayers didn't need line of sight to read you, but meeting their gaze always felt... wrong.

At the far end, we entered another elevator. This one was worlds apart—polished mirrors lined every wall, and dark oak panels replaced bare metal. Two scrying orbs glowed softly in the top corners, their etched runes watching everything. Security, it seemed, grew tighter the higher we climbed.

Del pressed the twentieth-floor button. The elevator moved without a sound, the only signs of motion the shifting indicator above the door and the odd weight in my stomach.

I wanted to release the tension I'd gathered when going through the floor below, but the coming gauntlet held me like a compressed spring.

"Prepare yourself," Del said, still staring at the seam of the doors. "The Arbiter's secretary is an O'rok—despite appearances."

The mirrors revealed how shabby I looked—hoodie soaked through, strings frayed, last washed probably sometime last year. "I'll dress in my thenthday's best," I said with a mocking grin.

"Vassago—" Shara began, but Del cut her off with a raised hand.

"I wouldn't exactly call us friends, V," he said, turning his head just enough to give me a side-eye. "But I've come to trust you—more than any other street rat I've seen. So here's a warning. You're not dealing with warehouse guards making minimum wage or Warden wannabes playing hero. This is the Arbiter—the ultimate guardian of the free city, arguably one of the most powerful people in the Vizier." He exhaled sharply. "Whatever happens in the next few hours decides whether the three of us walk out or end up on the block. So until you're done talking to her, show some respect."

As much as I wanted to toss a clever line back at him, he'd struck a chord. Survival came first—pride was a luxury. I swallowed the barb and gave a small nod.

"Alright," I breathed. "I'll try my best."

The rest of the ride passed in silence until a soft chime announced our arrival. The doors opened to a massive rotunda. Black marble gleamed underfoot, flecked with white, polished enough to throw back our reflections. Limestone walls rose around us, broken every ten feet by ribbed pillars. Between each set, gilded paintings of decorated Wardens stared down in solemn ranks.

The air pressed down on me—not with humidity or anything tangible, but with sheer authority. My hairs stood on end as a tingle ran up my spine. Even the scent seemed heightened, crisp and sterile, like the burst of pure oxygen from a canister.

But the ceiling stole everything else from view—a painted dome alive with color, armies locked in battle, steel clashing, wizards hurling storms. At its center, a golden, six-winged figure held a six-pointed red star: Ler’olen Arkanthos, the last ascendant emperor of the Exalted.

Without realizing it, I’d drifted into the room, caught by the artistry, until a polite throat-clearing pulled me back. Behind a broad mahogany desk stood a man in a Warden dress uniform, hair slicked neatly back, golden-framed glasses glinting. He tugged at his jacket to smooth the creases and folded his hands in front of him with quiet precision.

“Vassago Aeider, as ordered,” Del said, his tone clipped and drilled into habit.

“Very well, Sergeant. You are dismissed.” The Captain’s voice came sharp and precise, pitched just a little too high for his wiry frame, but there was nothing soft in it.

“But, Captain—” Del started, but the Captain’s eyes cut to him like blades, silencing the rest.

“Sergeant.” The word cracked like a whip.

Something in Del shifted. His heels snapped together, fist ramming his chest, and his spine locked straight.

“By your will, I take my leave, Captain,” he said, just shy of shouting.

He pivoted and marched out. Shara followed, her pace quick, shoulders tight.

Then, it was just me and the Captain. The room seemed to shrink under the weight of his stare. His eyes didn’t simply look at me—they judged, dissected, daring me to breathe wrong.

“Sit.”

One word, cold as iron. He flicked a hand toward a row of lacquered mahogany benches I hadn’t noticed before, the gesture sharp, almost dismissive. Everything about him radiated a challenge, daring me to slip, to give him the smallest excuse. His voice stayed low, but the venom was plain.

Black Gods, I despised Wardens like him. But Del was right—this wasn’t the time to be clever.

After a moment’s pause, I dipped my head and moved, slow and measured. His eyes tracked me all the way to the bench, following like a drawn bowstring waiting to loose.

For the next half hour, the Captain worked as though I didn’t exist. The only sounds were the sharp clack of his keyboard and the slow, deliberate scratch of his pen, each stroke as precise

as a blade being honed. I sat still. Every minute stretched thin, his silence more suffocating than words.

When the antique long-band messenger stone rang, the sound shattered the quiet. He let it ring twice, though his hand hovered over it the entire time, ready from the first chime.

“Yes, my lady.”

“No, my lady.”

“Of course.”

“By your will.”

The call ended as abruptly as it began, severed clean as a blade. He rose with military precision, each movement stripped of hesitation, tugging his coat until not a single wrinkle dared remain. His gaze cut to me—sharp, impenetrable. No words, no gesture, nothing to grasp onto. Yet in that void of expression, the command was absolute, heavier than if he had shouted it aloud.

Without having to be told, I stood. He turned on his heel, leading me to a door I hadn’t seen before—an elevator framed in gold and ivory carvings behind his desk. He keyed in a code, each press deliberate, and the doors whispered open.

He stepped aside, giving me space to enter, but it was no courtesy. His eyes never softened; they followed me like drawn steel. I stepped inside, feeling them on me even as the doors slid shut. It was the stare that promised nothing good.

//ERR: DATA PURGED

//RSP: RESTORING

...LOADING...

//CMD: START PLAYBACK

The door opened into a utilitarian office, stripped of comfort. Dark crimson wood made up the floor, polished but unadorned. The walls were thick stone—granite, maybe—except for the back wall, which was nothing but a massive spell-forged window overlooking the Ziggurat of the Hall.

The furniture was sparse and almost surgical. Two contrakasam shelves—an anti-magic alloy—lined with books in a dozen languages. A single stainless steel desk dominated the space. It was nearly bare: two neat stacks of papers no higher than half an inch, a single metal cup with a spare pen, and a silver desk lamp casting a precise pool of light. No wastebasket. No nameplate. The kind of room that said the occupant didn’t need reminders of who they were.

She didn’t either.

The Arbiter couldn’t have been far past thirty, but she carried the weight of command like a mantle of iron. She stood over the desk as if pinning it down, one hand braced on a document

that looked ready to flee. Her platinum-blonde hair was tied high and tight, drawing back a face cut from angles—stark blue eyes, sharp brows, the cold poise of a raptor.

Her uniform prioritized dominance, not comfort. Heavy epaulets bore seven gold bars each, tassels falling like banners of authority. The black-and-red jacket clung too small to close, its oversized gold buttons gleaming more as symbols than fasteners. Underneath, a dark blue shirt fit close, tailored like armor. Cargo pants of sythread looked functional but ruthless—no padding, just clean straps for the pistol at her hip. Even her shoes, black and mirror-bright, seemed made for command, not travel.

When I finally dragged my gaze up, she was already watching me. The page beneath her hand forgotten, her eyes locked on me with the unblinking precision of a hawk appraising prey.

“Approach.”

The word rolled out cold, authority steaming like frost in the air.

Before I could think, I obeyed, driven by something between fear and curiosity. She rose to her full height, the sound of cloth shifting sharp in the quiet.

“You are Vassago?” Not insult, not challenge—interest edged with steel.

“Uh—yes, ma’am,” I stammered.

She reached for the document, lifting it as if presenting a verdict.

“Twenty-three counts of petty larceny on record. Though we both know the real number’s higher. Four counts of arson. One of corporate espionage.” Her blue eyes speared me, unblinking. “And one count... pending.”

A hundred arguments crowded my tongue—like how she’d be the one in hot water if anyone learned she was funding that espionage—but they all froze beneath that winter stare.

“I’m sure you know,” she said, voice smooth but edged like glass, “that if I wanted you in prison, you’d already be there—funding your missions doesn’t make you untouchable.”

The words hit hard. I scrambled for a rebuttal, heat rising in my face as I readied to counter her—but what could I say? I had no power here. Fear swallowed my voice, and if she noticed, she gave no sign.

“I have a deal for you,” she continued. “You want answers. I need your skills.”

Even through the dread, a scoff escaped me. “Do I have a choice?”

“No,” she said simply, unbothered. “I’ll be telling you things very few even in the Tower know. Secrets that could bury us both. Without me, you’d end up in a cell—or a grave. And believe me, I’d choose the latter if you became a risk.”

She lowered herself into a chair, spinning it toward the wide window, gazing at the palace crowning the Ziggurat.

“But I don’t want you here because I threatened you,” she said, eyes hard, fixed on the distant gates. “Good soldiers don’t fight for fear or lack of options—they fight for something more.”

Her next words slid under my ribs.

“I know you hate Magitech more than the Black Gods hate the sunrise. I know you want your parents’ killers. I know every job you’ve taken has been another stone on that path.”

The secrets I’d buried were suddenly naked on the table between us.

“I can’t hand you justice,” she went on, fingers tightening on the chair arms, the scrubbers above giving a faint, restless hum—was she a mage? “The Vizier works against me, prodded along by the mountain of coin Magitech pours into those palace hogs. They cut me at every angle.”

Then her gaze swung back, cold fire in her eyes.

“A Warden can’t give you what you want. But I can give you the tools to take it yourself.”

The temperature seemed to shift. My fear eased, replaced by something else—a spark of curiosity.

“What kind of tools?”

“Training. Others like you. And as much support as I can spare while keeping your team hidden.” Her eyes, bright and sharp, caught mine; for a heartbeat, they glowed like ice catching light.

Something didn’t line up. Valago was crawling with orphans nursing grudges against Magitech, kids harder, smarter, maybe even meaner.

“Why me?” My voice carried a suspicious edge, sharper than I meant.

The Arbiter didn’t flinch. “I wonder,” she said lightly, flipping the page on her desk and turning it toward me. “If you agree, the answers will come. But none of them will be given—only earned.”

My hand rested on the contract as I scanned it. The words were dressed in legal armor, thick with jargon, but the meaning was clear enough: signing meant belonging to the Wardens. Not to her, not to one officer, but to the entire machine. Property of the organization.

Was that better? Worse? I wasn’t sure.

Rejection out of principle came to mind first, but the alternative was death—and she knew it. And if she was telling the truth, this came with things I hadn’t had in years: a bed that wasn’t cold concrete, meals I didn’t have to steal, and training to turn me into something more than a street rat.

Even that simple promise felt like a luxury.

The Arbiter must have read the decision on my face. Without a word, she reached for the cup on her desk and offered me the pen—black trimmed in gold, heavier than I expected. It was probably worth more than everything I owned.

I signed where she indicated.

She didn't watch the pen move; instead; she opened a desk drawer and retrieved a yellow folder packed with papers. When I finished, she closed the folder with quiet finality and looked up, hands resting on the desk like a judge about to deliver a sentence.

"Now," she said, voice calm but edged with purpose, "let's talk about exactly what you're going to be doing here."

//RSP: PLAYBACK TERMINATED

Chapter 4

//NAME: VASSAGO AEIDER

//CIN: 180-65-3564

//AGE: 20

//SEX: MALE

...

//CMD: INITIALIZE PLAYBACK OF F3

Three days of being dragged around the Tower for one meaningless task after another, I finally got a room barely a hundred square feet in size. The floor was cheap white tile, scuffed and stained by past occupants; the walls, white-painted cinder block. The low ceiling tiled with dull mineral fiber and the furniture was bare-bones. A narrow bed stripped to issued linens, a rough wooden chair, and an oak desk the Arbiter had “gifted” me.

The desk I sat over darkened under my shadow. My Warden fatigues hung loose on my frame—the same gear every street Warden wore, only without the hat, mask, or vest. I pencil spun between my fingers over a mostly blank sheet of paper. My burner phone lay open, warehouse photos displayed like evidence waiting for judgment.

Turns out the warehouse job hadn’t just been a sting. The Arbiter hadn’t lied about wanting MT’s documents—it was my first mission to make sense of them, and I had full rein of the Tower and its database. But only from her and in private, the Board was kept in the dark. What that meant was I had permission to snoop so long as I didn’t get caught. If I did, the punishment would be ‘light.’ Comforting...

The wooden chair protested as I leaned back, rubbing my eyes, the first prickle of a headache forming. The jargon was a wall I couldn’t climb. I needed help—someone with tech expertise or a psychic who could make sense of this mess.

With a sigh, I stood and grabbed my holster from the bed, sliding the pistol into place. Maybe a walk would clear my head. I hadn’t seen Del or Shara since the sharp dismissal at the top of the Tower. A fresh set of eyes and maybe a little catching up couldn’t hurt.

The Tower was mostly unfamiliar, but I’d gotten used to the grunt sections: endless corridors, always humming. Every morning, a sergeant named Taylor put me through endurance drills; at night, he ran me through firearms training. The man looked like he’d gone three rounds with a brick wall—jaw bruised purple despite a healer’s work. I didn’t want to meet whatever could do that to someone his size.

Navigating the lower corridors, I wound my way to the Thunderwall section, its emblem—a shield split by a lightning bolt—stared down from the walls. The hall stretched long, lined with doors leading to the Wardens’ rooms. My room might have been smaller than most dorms, but I

didn't have to share it. Shara wasn't so lucky. Del, of course, rated his own space. Rank had its privileges.

Of course, neither had volunteered their room numbers, but getting processed through the administrative floors left me unsupervised long enough to poke around a few databases and filing cabinets that might as well have been unlocked. The rest was history.

Del was more trouble—too many ranks between us, and anyone below Sergeant would get me flagged for wandering his section. Not worth the risk.

Shara's door echoed as I knocked. "One sec!" came her voice, followed by the thump of hurried steps.

When the door swung open, I almost forgot why I was there. I'd seen her plenty, talked to her often—but always geared up, always ready for a fight. Now? Not so much.

She wore loose Grevarra sweats hanging off her hips, a black tank top cropped just enough to flash defined abs. Her auburn hair, usually tied back, spilled loose, cascading to her waist. She looked at me like I'd interrupted something important. Her expression was confused, then irritated.

"Vassago? How the hell did you find my room?"

Before I could answer, she cut me off with a raised finger.

"Actually—don't. I don't want to know. What do you want?" Her gaze flicked down, taking in my fatigues. "Oh fuck. You can't be serious." She said, realizing what my outfit meant.

"Well, that's rude," I said, deflecting her comment with a crooked grin. "Anyway, you busy?"

A voice floated from inside. "Who's at the door?" Another woman—light, curious.

"No one," Shara snapped, throwing a glare back into the room. She stepped out, shutting the door with more force than necessary, and planted herself between me and it like a bouncer.

Her expression cooled to something harder. "You'd better tell me why the fuck you're here—and why I should care."

"Damn, alright—I thought we were friends after all the—"

Shara's hand slapped over my mouth so fast it stung.

"Shut up and get to the point," she said, leaving her palm there like a warning.

I raised a brow, and gestured at the offending hand until she reluctantly pulled it away.

"That hurt," I said, deadpan.

"I'll do it again," she warned, palm lifting like a loaded weapon.

"Alright, alright." I straightened my fatigues as if I cared. "The lady of the tower—our gracious benefactor—has me working the info I pulled from the warehouse."

"It wasn't just an O'rok shit job to get the three of us under her thumb?" Shara questioned.

My eyes darted down the hall. Scrying orbs dotted the ceiling like watchful eyes. I dropped my voice. "This isn't the place for details. And for some reason, you don't trust me enough to step inside your room." My hands slid into my pockets. "So—you coming or not?"

Something shifted on her face, a flicker of frustration shadowed by something heavier. "Give me a second to change," she said, voice dipping with an edge of resignation.

I tilted my head. "Am I really that bad?"

She didn't answer.

A minute later, she stepped out dressed to match me, auburn hair vanished into a portal ring—a sleek, enchanted band that folded it away into a pocket dimension. The thing probably cost more than everything I owned, but she wore it like a hair tie.

"Sweatpants from Grevarra and now a portal ring for your hair? You holding out on me?" I asked as we walked.

"What, you gonna grab a cardboard sign and beg for some of my coins?" she shot back.

"Silver's silver." I shrugged.

We stepped out of the Tower into the west pavilion, where the sheer scale of the structure made everything else feel small. Sleek, angular helicopters lined the far side, their blades folded like resting wings. To the south, a motor pool bristled with three-axled, flat-fronted trucks, each armored and waiting. Closest to the Tower, carved right into its base, a mech bay spread out like an iron forest. Machines of every size filled it—some barely four meters tall, others towering ten stories. Each one unique, a nightmare for maintenance crews I imagined.

"So, out with it," Shara said, breaking my focus on the steel giants.

"Whatever I pulled from the warehouse—it's important," I said.

"Important enough that she's got you doing the digging, not her own analysts?"

"Exactly the opposite," I said. "The Arbiter's scared. Thinks MT's got eyes in every hallway, maybe even in the Tower. Doesn't trust her own people to touch this stuff."

Shara's brow arched. "Really? What's got her so jumpy?"

"Not sure," I admitted. "Your Arbiter's not exactly an open book."

"Yours too now," Shara added, voice dry.

A groan escaped me. "Anyway, I can't make heads or tails of it. It's full of paraphysial jargon."

"Maybe you don't need to know exactly what it means," Shara said, pulling a battered pack of cigarettes from her cargo pocket and slipping one between her lips.

"How the hell else am I supposed to get a grip on this stuff?" I asked, one brow raised.

She struck a lighter, the flame briefly painted her face gold before the cigarette glowed. She took a long, steady drag. "Gangs are clever with their codes. They don't just say, 'Hey, meet me here, buy this drug.' It's all phrases and patterns."

Palm up, I reached out a hand.

"You smoke?" she asked.

"No."

"Then fuck off." She exhaled a ribbon of smoke, perfectly calm. "Same principle applies here. We skim the doc for repeating terms, cross-reference with other MT messages, and figure out what's worth attention—either what it means, where it's going, or who it's coming from."

Surprise plain on my face, "That's actually smart. Academy taught you that?"

She took another drag and chuckled. "They gave us the basics. But you? You never gave Del or me a straight answer, so we had to learn to read between the lines. You trained us more than the instructors did."

"God, I'm so proud of you." I said with a mock sniffle.

Her scowl deepened. "That's more insult than compliment."

With a wave of my hand, I dismissed her insult. "Now I just need somewhere that can monitor comm traffic to and from the city. That's a mountain of data for one guy."

"Not a problem you're solving today," Shara said, blowing smoke rings like it was nothing.

Shoulders rising in a shrug, I continued. "Still, you've been a huge help. Surprisingly generous, even."

She shot me a sidelong glance. "You think I'm doing this for free?"

"I mean, I've got the payout from the warehouse job, but I'm not exactly swimming in coin," I said, wishing harder for that cigarette.

She scoffed. "It's always about money with you, isn't it, V?"

"What else could you possibly want from me?"

//ERR: CORRUPT DATA

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

As I stood in a sparring ring, I knew I'd somehow fundamentally made a mistake. Shara stood across from me like a carnivore testing its cage. If I weren't about to get my teeth rearranged, I might've told her she looked good in her fighting gear. I, on the other hand, looked like a charity case—scrawny, still worn thin from too many hungry nights. I thought back to that crow in the parking lot and wished I had wings.

Shara cracked her knuckles and slammed her fists together, the sound sharp enough to make me flinch.

"Be gentle," I said, raising my hands in mock surrender. "My bones are as fragile as my ego."

"Good," she replied, but the smile she gave promised nothing gentle.

The bell rang and Shara moved like a pseudofelis let loose, springing forward with predatory ease.

Even darting to the side had her coming dangerously close. Cursing the ropes hemming me in, Shara was already pivoting, closing the distance.

She didn't strike at first—just feints and flashes, quick jabs and false kicks to keep me off balance while I scrambled to stay out of the corners.

Then her foot came high and fast toward my ribs. My guard dropped instinctively, ready to catch the blow. It barely brushed my side—light, deliberate—before the kick flicked upward, catching me square on the ear.

The impact turned soft leather into a gunshot. Pain rang through my skull, sending me staggering.

Teeth rattling against my mouth guard, I shook my head clear, but that fraction of hesitation was enough. Shara was inside my guard.

A right hook came around my guard. I blocked it clumsily, Taylor's crash course in hand-to-hand flashing uselessly through my head.

The follow-up told me everything: a sharp left to the gut, driving the air out of me and confirming she was a southpaw. Before I could recover, her foot snapped low at my knee, quick and mean.

It was a battle to stay upright under Shara's assault. I'd taken beatings before, and knew going down early meant broken bones, or worse.

But I was off balance, dipping left, my stance crumbling.

She saw it and didn't hesitate. Her strong arm came down in a diagonal arc, perfect leverage, perfect angle—a strike meant to turn my teeth to gravel.

A flash of white. Stars spun in my vision as I staggered onto the ropes—thankfully not into a corner.

Shara advanced. No grin, no playful glint. Just focus. Serious, dangerous. That she saw me as a real opponent sent a flicker of fear through me—and, oddly, a thrill.

My right jab struck out at her as I stepped forward. Not bad for someone barely a few days into training. But Shara? She'd been doing this for years.

She slipped it like water, head tilting just past my fist, and came back with a rising uppercut.

It didn't take long to realize that guns were never Shara's true weapon. She could hit a target, sure, but Del could out-shoot her nine times out of ten. Her strength was here, in close, where speed and muscle ruled.

Even with me trying to keep my chin down, her fist found it, snapping my head back,, bouncing me off the ropes again.

She pressed the advantage, sliding in close, hands finding my head. Her gloved grip was iron. The knee came fast and hard. My forearms caught most of it, but I knew she wouldn't stay predictable.

Panic clouded my mind.

Lunging forward mid-strike, I wrapped my arms around her waist, trying to drag her down.

She didn't resist.

Instead, her bicep clamped against the back of my neck, forearm pressing across my throat as we went down. Her legs snapped around my hips like steel cables, squeezing, twisting.

Vision tunneling, struggling against her, every thrash made her tighten. Her core turned to stone, her grip unbreakable. My breath fled, strength bled away, and at last I crumpled.

A sting of pain pierced my face for a rude awakening.

Shara knelt over me, one knee down, a bottle of cold water pressed to my cheek.

"You can be really dramatic sometimes," she said.

I shot upright in retreat from the chill of the bottle. “Dramatic? You choked me out!”

She grinned, unfazed, and let me snatch the bottle.

“You did alright—stayed off the mat longer than I expected. Right up until you decided to spear me.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep in mind that you’re better on the ground from now on.” I said, taking a sip of water, bringing my fingers to my bloody brow.

“From now on?” She asked, one brow raised.

“Seems like a fair deal. You get to beat me up; I get to learn how to fight.” I said, shrugging.

She stood, brushing off her hands. I reached out, but her glare said enough—no help to come.

Pain slowed the climb to my feet, her eyes tracking every movement.

“Alright,” she said finally. “I’ve got time in the afternoons every ninth and tenth day. Maybe fourth day if I’m not buried in drills.”

Bloody teeth on display, rubbing the sore spot on my throat. “I’d call you a lifesaver, but you seemed a little too happy choking me.”

//RSP: PLAYBACK TERMINATED

Chapter 5

~Faith!

My visions roared, commanding my attention even as I sunk through a vast sea of possibility. But for now I had managed to cling to the present in my flat.~

My room sat on the nineteenth floor, two thousand square feet all to myself. The view of The Hall might have been gorgeous—if it weren't a constant reminder that we all lived in the palace's shadow.

It had been days since I last hurt myself—or anyone else—and the visions had swelled into a cacophony.

No matter how deep I sank or how hard I pushed, nothing worked. My flat's scrubbers had been replaced three times—once a day.

And yet, amid the chaos of my mind, there lingered a silence. A dead pixel on my brain. No matter how I strained, I couldn't lock onto it.

It was the kid Gabriel had mentioned—the only blind spot I had ever known. The only way I could tell it was him came from the figures that moved around him, and even that was difficult. He was a scotoma in my all-seeing mind, glimpsed only when others slipped in and out along his edges.

"Delringer." The name tore free through gritted teeth.

A sergeant and a corporal flickered most often through the gap, but even rituals accomplished nothing. Whatever that kid carried scrubbed his presence not only from me, but from the past and future of others.

The Shara woman had slipped away into it, leaving me no choice but to hunt down Sergeant Delringer in her stead.

I had dressed myself casually: boots, dark opaque stockings with a strip of pale skin showing before the cut of my jean shorts, a mage-slayer band tee under a fur-lined coat cropped above the ribs. Black lipstick and eyeliner completed the look. Not my normal vibe, but Delringer liked this look from what his futures told me.

I was far from a capable temptress. Most people came to me, not the other way around, so if he didn't bite immediately I'd have to resort to more... familiar methods.

My sight placed him in the range—with Taylor, unfortunately. If Taylor tipped him off, I would have to do things the hard way. Doing that outside of designated spars usually bought me a day or two in solitary, depending on how much I'd indulged myself.

~Finally, I slipped out of my Fading outside the range. Thank God. Sometimes it took hours to get down the hall when I'd lost it like that.~

The doors opened with a soft gust as I stepped inside, scanning the shooting stalls for Delringer. Instead, my eyes locked on Taylor. No mask today—his surprise written plain across his face, not that the mesh had ever hidden him from the Way Lines. Fear clung to him, mint-sharp, though weaker than during our spars. And beneath it all, a flicker of hot desire.

Annoyingly, he rose at once and moved to intercept me. “Faith, what are you doing here!” His voice carried excitement, but it rang false.

“Oh, you know. Taking a walk.” I flashed the most harmless smile I could manage. Judging from his face, it wasn’t convincing.

He leaned closer, his thoughts a storm pressing against me. My fist clenched until blood welled, the sting dulling the urge to tear his nose off.

Behind his smile, his whisper slipped free. “What are you doing here? Wasn’t the jaw bad enough?”

“Oh, you.” The words came loud, my hand landing heavy on his broad shoulder, my grip tight enough to make him wince. My lips brushed his ear, the venom in my voice unmistakable. “I’m looking for Sergeant Delringer.”

His gaze raked me up and down. “I can’t put that evil on him.”

I snarled “This isn’t a negotiation.”

Pain crossed his face, the visions dimming in the shadow of his pain.

He straightened to his full height, and I released his shoulder. “You’re right,” he said, voice hard, determination spilling into the Way Lines. “It isn’t.”

“As soon as I see him, I’ll know exactly who he is.”

“Not if I make it loud. You pull anything, and it’s off to Iso.”

Heat surged through me, leaving with a sharp huff as the scrubbers whirled overhead. “Fuck you,” I said, venom in my voice.

His posture eased, voice slipping into something almost casual. “Maybe I can help with whatever you need him for.” He paused. “Maybe not, though. He’d have to be braver than most.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve just never seen you dressed like this.” His voice wavered, though he tried to mask it with a smirk. “And let’s be honest—I don’t know a single man who could handle you. Maybe a woman... but you hate her guts.”

The image curdled my stomach. The Arbiter's touch, her lips, her weight—revolting. "I want information. Lust has always been the easiest way to pry it loose."

If he'd looked uncertain before, now was completely at a loss. His disbelief pressed against my third eye, raw and jagged. "You. Need information. The most powerful Soothsayer in Valago."

"It's complicated..."

His tone went lower. "Let's go into my office. More scrubbers in there."

~The Fade gripped me again, a blur of time before I stood in his office.~

Taylor's office was bare-bones compared to the gilded chambers higher up the Tower. A few shelves displayed war relics—shells from heavy cannons, exotic firearms from across the world, even a bow from the Mourning Sands. The rest was pedestrian: a particleboard desk wrapped in fake wood laminate, an old slouched office chair, and a dented gray filing cabinet.

The only remarkable feature was the sheer number of Way Line scrubbers bolted to the ceiling. Their aether filters turned in slow, deliberate circles around a core covered in spell-speech glyphs. Thin rods jutted outward like spokes. If the filters spun at all, it meant magic hung in the air—low concentrations, not immediately dangerous, but enough to carve rot into the soul with long exposure.

"What are the scrubbers picking up?" I asked.

"The range," Taylor said, sinking into his chair. "It uses light-bending sorcery to shift distance and perception. Harmless to most. But I spend more time here than anywhere else—when you're not knocking my teeth out. So I keep the extras running. Don't want my soul poisoned."

"Sorcery specifically?" My tone sharpened.

"Whatever's going on with you must be bad." He chuckled. "You asked instead of raking through visions for the answer."

For an instant, fury slipped free—enough to send the scrubbers whirling overhead and sweat to bead on Taylor's brow. "Forget I said anything," he muttered, correcting himself.

"The visions are getting louder every day," I snapped, dropping into a chair and slamming my boots onto his desk. "I'm not going to make it worse by dipping in for something this trivial—especially with the next match two weeks away."

Taylor huffed, scooping up the knickknacks I'd toppled with my feet. "So what's going on, Faith? And why do you need Del?"

The visions broke over me, as I held against the Fading—for now.

What could I tell him that wouldn't give away too much? Could I trust him? As I drifted along the current of his fate, I felt... gaps. Sudden drops, like vertigo. The sensation echoed what I'd felt with Delringer and Shara. Had he met Vassago? That would complicate everything.

The visions thinned at my command, though a few clung stubbornly, briars hooked in flesh. I tore them free with a flare of soul-force, knowing it wouldn't last. Without the violence of sparring to ground me, my control frayed.

Taylor was the closest thing to a friend I had in the Tower. A little trust might go further than silence. And if it didn't—well, I could always beat him within an inch of his life next time we fought.

"The kid joining my task force," I paused, waiting for a flicker of recognition.

"Vassago, right? Haven't met him, but Del's mentioned him once or twice."

Yeah, that's the whole reason I want to have a talk with him." My scowl cut deep. "I can't see him in my visions. Not even indirectly through others."

His chair creaked as he leaned back. "That's... a pretty big deal."

"No shit."

"Does the Arbiter know about this?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. But she rarely lets coincidence dictate her plans."

Taylor huffed, hands dropping to his desk as he laced his fingers together. "I'm willing to help you out here, but you need to make some guarantees first." His green eyes narrowed, searching for a flicker of dishonesty in what I'd say next.

My curt nod gave him the go-ahead.

"You won't draw blood or put him in the infirmary. I know you can be... volatile when the visions get loud, so I'll let small stuff slide, but nothing more."

A grunt marked my acceptance. That stripped away my contingency—but I could always rake his mind if it came to it.

"And don't think that if you wait a day or two and leave him a gibbering mess for a month, I won't know it's you. I'll make sure that spar gets pushed back for as long as he takes to recover."

My face colored into a bitter frown. Coach had been clever—giving anyone I worked with the authority to throw me into Iso or delay spar dates to keep me in line. Damn him for being so smart.

"Fine."

Taylor nodded, rising from his chair. "I'll go get him. Just sit tight."

A few unbearable minutes later, Taylor returned with Delringer close behind.

"This is the girl I told you about. Been looking all over for you since she spotted you at the gym," Taylor said as he dropped into his chair.

I rose, stretching into a smile I rarely showed outside of the ring.

"I wouldn't want to take the lady's seat," Delringer said.

"It's fine. I've grown restless waiting." I let out a giggle.

The Way Lines burned as his eyes loitered—raw, unguarded—for only a heartbeat before vanishing. He severed it with precision, as if nothing had slipped at all. Intriguing. He wasn't a mage; I could smell that. Yet his control over emotional bleed was cleaner than most Wardens I'd crossed. Taylor, by contrast, bled doubt so freely it drowned the room.

So Delringer wasn't easily subdued by lust. That complicated things. I wasn't confident in my ability to seduce him, so I'd have to take a different approach.

Delringer glanced at Taylor for permission, and something about it stoked a growl low in my chest. My power flared, heat licking the edges of the room, minor and fleeting—small enough that anyone else might have missed it. But not Taylor.

"Is the spell heater acting up?" Delringer asked.

"Just sit down, Del," Taylor said, gesturing to the chair.

After Delringer sat, I positioned myself so Taylor and his desk would be behind me. "You any good at shooting? I've never had the knack for it."

He hesitated, but then eased into the conversation.

"I'm actually a pretty good masseuse," I said. Taylor shivered, an involuntary flicker into his mind telling me he was thinking of all the pain my hands had wrung out of him in the ring.

"You feeling stiff?" I asked, the words honeyed.

"I mean, I wouldn't want to take any of your time here for that," Delringer said cautiously.

"It's just to see if I'm worth calling on later to work out the knots," I pressed, keeping the smile soft as I wrestled the hot edge of frustration clawing at me.

"Can't hurt," Taylor said. "She worked at that place a few blocks away."

"Moonveil?" Delringer asked.

“Yeah, that’s the one. You’ve been talking about going soon, right? Could be a good way to see if it’s worth the money.”

He wasn’t buying what Taylor or I were selling, he’d likely already sniffed out I was a Soothsayer. But with Taylor outranking him and me carrying obvious importance, he chose the prudent path and accepted.

Delringer nodded, and I stepped behind him, letting my hands slide onto his shoulders. He wasn’t as broad as Taylor or Gabriel, but that made the sharpness stand out more. His frame carried lean strength, his youth carved into hard lines as if he’d already seen too much. It gave him an edge I liked, a rawness that made him better looking than most of the Wardens I’d watched stalking the halls.

The visions crashed over me like a wall, my soul’s blade dulled with every second I sank deeper. Over and over I skimmed the futures, adjusting the pressure of my fingers, the angle of my touch, learning with each glimpse how he responded. He was prey laid bare before me, every reaction mapped in a dozen tomorrows.

To me, it stretched into hours, though only seconds passed for Delringer. My hands moved in slow, coaxing patterns, my voice dripping with idle small talk and veiled compliments—nothing more than bait to hold him steady while I worked.

Then his phone buzzed. The screen lit, a name flashing. He jolted upright, moving to take the call outside.

With my hands pressing on his shoulders, I forced him back into the chair. “Answer it.” The words slipped out sharper than I meant.

“I’m not sure I—” The scrubbers buzzed to life, heat thickening the air.

“Answer it,” I repeated, softer this time. Soothing, like a blade stroked flat before the cut.

I leaned over him, close enough my smile hid the venom behind it. “I’m sure it’s important.”

He swallowed hard and thumbed the line open. A woman’s voice spilled into the room. “Hey, Del.”

The sergeant—ever the master of composure—spoke as though I weren’t draped over him like a noose. “Yeah. What’s up, Shara?”

“Vassago’s busted up, might be late to patrol.”

“What? How did that happen? And why do you have to deal with it?” His irritation cut through fear. I saw his expression clearly with no need of the Way Lines.

“Well, it’s a lot to explain—” she began.

A man’s voice shouted in the background.

“She’s the one that did the busting!”

I can truthfully say I was surprised by the first words that came out of Vassago’s mouth. I wasn’t sure what I expected from a kid capable of shutting out fortune-telling as potent as mine—but it wasn’t this.

As the voices on the other end tangled in argument, I drove my fingers deeper into Delringer’s shoulders. “Why don’t we all meet at the infirmary? I’m sure being with friends would help Mr. Vassago.”

Delringer’s face twisted. “Don’t ever use Mister and Vassago in the same sentence again.”

Then it hit him who he’d corrected. His eyes flicked up. “Ma’am,” he added quickly.

~My visions welled to a roar and slowly reality Faded. Hopefully everything would go well while I was consumed.~

Chapter 6

//NAME: VASSAGO AEIDER

//CIN: 180-65-3564

//AGE: 20

//SEX: MALE

...

//CMD: INITIALIZE PLAYBACK OF F4

A bloody rag pressed to my split brow, I leaned forward with elbows on my knees, nursing another headache. Before this, the docs claimed it came from constant hunger and stress—said it would fade once I ate properly—but this newest one felt like it came from getting rocked.

“Think you might’ve given me a TBI,” I muttered.

Shara sat beside me, limbs folded. “Was trying to knock some sense into you.”

“You know I’m no fighter,” I said, flashing a tired grin, “but I know my way around a shadow or two. Keep your eyes open.”

She scoffed. “I’ll try not to hurt you when you pull your little sneak attack.”

The infirmary’s first-floor placement was practical, not aesthetic; easier to haul the broken in from the street. White stone flecked with red, blue, and green lay sealed under epoxy; plain sheetrock walls; sagging mineral-fiber ceiling tile. The air bit colder than the upper halls, and the hum of machines carried through every corridor. The ER waiting room could’ve been any hospital outside the Tower.

Years of distrust kept me at the rear—back to the wall, eyes on every exit. I played the fool, all smiles and small talk, but every glance mapped an escape. In a place like this, ignorance wasn’t bliss. It was bait. That habit tipped me off to a trio long before they noticed us—before even Shara caught on.

Del walked in front but carried none of a leader's weight. Behind him loomed one of the largest men I'd seen in Valago, let alone the Tower. Rough tan face, five o'clock shadow bristling over a scar like an old bruise set in stone. Emerald eyes shone beneath his heavy brow. Taylor—one of the rare Wardens I actually liked.

Beside him was a Woman with a capital W. Taller than everyone save Taylor—the only one who could look down on her. Honey-blond hair cropped above the shoulders, circled by a braid like a golden wreath. Face pale, fierce, and angular—some warrior-princess torn from a northern saga. Silver-rimmed sunglasses hid her eyes, but I felt them the instant she entered; pins and needles followed wherever her gaze fell. A cropped jacket ended just above her ribs, a fitted mage-slayer shirt beneath that hugged her curves. Black denim shorts, opaque stockings, and boots traced long, lethal lines. Elegance and danger in equal measure.

She was the most striking woman I'd seen in the Wardens, maybe in the city—and every instinct screamed **danger**.

"Ler'olen V, what did you do?" Del asked as they closed in.

"I'm the one bleeding, and you're asking what I did?" I jabbed a finger at Shara. "What about her?"

Taylor and Del turned toward her, but the woman didn't so much as twitch. Her head stayed fixed on me, her shades giving her the air of an unblinking, merciless animal.

"She probably had a reason," Taylor said dryly.

He hadn't known me long, but Del had run his mouth enough that by the time we met the guy already thought he had me pegged.

"You're supposed to be on my side, Taylor," I said, low and disapproving.

"Right, forgot." He switched without missing a beat. "What the fuck did you do, Shara?"

A man to admire.

Del cut in before the conversation drifted. "Get changed, Shara. Taylor will stay with V, since apparently he's a child who needs an escort everywhere."

A sudden wash of heat rolled through the room, gone as quickly as it came. My eyes flicked to the spell heater, expecting a malfunction, only to catch the Way Line scrubbers spinning lazily overhead.

Magic.

"Uh, sorry," Taylor muttered, "the Witch Breakers are running drills at the range in thirty minutes. I'm already pushing it by coming down here."

"He's a new recruit, right?" the woman asked, voice warm. "Cadets can't move through certain parts of the Tower without an escort. I'm free the rest of the day—I'll keep an eye on him."

Most men would've melted under a voice like that, but I felt the danger under the silk. Shara could frighten me, sure—but that fear was drilled, predictable. She wouldn't injure me by accident.

This woman's calm was effortless. Every step whispered **instinct**. No one had to teach her to kill. She'd been born to.

The others left. I extended a hand as she closed the distance, doing my best to bury fear under a cocky veneer.

"Vassago," I said.

"Faith." She took my hand, and a shiver rippled through her—starting at the contact and spreading like a wave. Her smile curdled into something I couldn't name. "It's a little chilly in here."

"Yeah," I muttered, glancing at the hand she still hadn't released.

She let go at last and sat beside me. Silence settled—heavy, deliberate. My brain screamed danger; my heart whispered something baser.

"If you'd like," she leaned in—stopping just shy of too close—"I could try my hand at healing you."

My brow furrowed, pain lancing the cut. Magic had never healed me before—not that I remembered. I wasn't sure if that said more about me or the kind of people I ran with. But if those scrubbers flaring earlier were her doing, she wasn't a novice. Middling skill at least—maybe more.

"What if you fuck it up?" The wariness slipped through. Couldn't blame me—trust never healed a wound either.

A faint twitch of her fingers at that.

Why the kindness act, and how to play it—push until the mask cracked, or go along? Smarter to play along.

Her lips curved up—plump, dark, deliberate. “It might hurt. Might leave a scar. But girls like scars,” she said, eyes hidden behind her shades.

I glanced toward the front desk. The nurse who’d checked me in was gone. Odd.

I swallowed the flicker of fear. “Sure.”

I pulled the bloodied rag from my brow, and she touched my face. My eyes betrayed me, tracing her features, slipping lower—to the strip of bare thigh her posture revealed.

Magic seeped in. A low buzz bloomed in my skull, pins and needles rippling outward—like a stone dropped in still water.

Vision sharpened. Faith’s legs were smooth, shaved like most women—but beneath the skin I saw more: muscle fibers flexing, tugging at each follicle as if trying to stand the cut hairs on end.

//RSP: SYSTEM RECOVERY ACTIVATED

The sensation swelled, relentless. Hearing followed. Through walls and corridors, the nurse’s voice—strained, anxious.

“What’s a Faber doing here? Is she tied to the new kid?”

//RSP: RESTORING PRIME DIRECTIVE

The whisper rose to a roar. Overhead, the scrubbers screamed, straining against the spike in spell-force.

I felt everything—each ridge of her fingerprint pressed to my skin, every subtle shift in pressure across the room.

//RSP: COHERENCE INDEX FALLING

The world shuddered. The filters blurred, spinning faster and faster.

Strength flooded me. Everything felt fragile—like the world might shatter if I breathed too hard.

The buzzing climbed, ruinous, stretching every neuron thin—trembling to contain the surge.

//CMD: CONSUME ENERGY

My hand snapped forward—a smear of motion even to my heightened vision. I struck her wrist hard enough to send her arm flying back.

The buzz collapsed, taking the clarity with it. Blood slid down my brow, pulling me back to myself.

I blinked, breath sharp. Faith's wrist hung at an unnatural angle.

"Fuck, I'm sorry! I don't know what came over me, I just—"

The words died.

She seized her hand at the root, yanked, and with a wet crack the joint snapped back into place. Not even a flinch. Just a smile, wide and wolfish.

"I think the nurses will see you now," she said as the scrubbers' whirring slowed.

A cluster of nurses rushed out at the noise, then froze behind the desk—wide-eyed, transfixed.

"Will you be seeing him now?" Faith asked—not a question but a command.

"Yes... our apologies for the wait," a nurse said, voice aiming for calm and missing.

//ERR: DATA PURGED

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

A few stitches later, I stepped out from the back. Faith waited just outside.

She'd arranged for us to be alone—obvious now. The *why* still slipped my grasp. Motive meant leverage—maybe safety. For now, innocence sat on her face like a paper-thin mask, and I didn't know how long it would hold.

"Feel better?" she asked as I passed, sliding easily into step beside me.

"Uh, yeah. They gave me some painkillers." I shook the orange bottle. My veneer of confidence shivered under her shaded stare.

"Sorry I couldn't help. I'm still learning." She sauntered, tone light.

Why do the hot ones always come with a catch?

"It's fine," I said. "You tried hard—the way the scrubbers were spinning proved that."

"Sorry—don't always know my strength." A faint smile. "Did the docs give you any mana treatment?" Curiosity threaded her voice.

They hadn't—and normally that meant nothing. But right after her so-called healing failed, it set off alarms. Even during light-bending drills at the range, the scrubbers never spun like that. Which left two conclusions: one, she'd poured more magic into me than I'd ever held in my life, and two, I was completely unscathed.

Even with scrubbers, spell-sickness should've had me puking blood or strapped to a cot. Instead, I felt fine. Too fine. Whatever test she pulled could've killed me. Apprentice healer, my ass.

So why wasn't I sick? Is that why she'd singled me out? She'd shivered the first time our hands touched—maybe that meant something. If I could catch her off guard and touch her again, maybe I'd draw the same reaction.

Randomly grabbing her could earn worse than a scolding. But I was still outside the infirmary.

I reached out, fingers closing on her wrist. The same jolt ripped through her as before, but this time I felt it cleanly: a passage of power. Energy poured from her skin into me—nothing like I'd imagined. I'd always pictured power in the blood, hot and heady, like adrenaline. Instead, the siphon made me vibrate, grain by grain. Every atom in me shook like a jar of rattling stones. Soreness followed, the ache of muscles rebuilding after a brutal workout.

Faith spun, startled, eyes flashing. Her free hand whipped in a high arc, fingers hooked to tear. I leaned back by a hair's breadth, releasing her wrist as her strike carved air where my face had been.

She squared up, every muscle screaming violence. For a heartbeat I saw her without the mask—raw, primal instinct—then she blinked it away. I wasn't sure which version scared me more.

"I haven't been in the Tower long," I said, stance firm, measuring the distance, "but I know you're no random Good Samaritan helping a new cadet."

The fake smile slipped. Anger rose.

"The scrubbers in the ER caught the heat you threw off. And Del might look like stone to most, but I've known him long enough to tell when he's being leaned on—especially lately."

A scowl darkened her face.

"Taylor was banged up when I first met him a few days ago. My bet? You did it, considering how close you two are."

Heat swelled. The scrubbers spun up with a hum.

It was a bluff, but her reaction said I'd hit the mark. The only question was how much more I could pull before she snapped.

"I heard a powerful Soothsayer moved into the Tower recently." I let a grin spread—sharp, mocking. "Would her name happen to be Faith Faber?"

She lunged.

Shara had been fast, but she never struck to maim. Faith did. I raised my arm to shield my face; her nails raked deep, furious lines across my skin. I staggered, and she pressed—relentless. A wild kick snapped at my knee; she wanted me prone.

Backing away fed her momentum—and I'd learned the worst move against a predator was retreat. This time I planted both feet and shoved with everything I had.

Only—"everything" was more than I expected.

Faith flew a dozen feet, crashing down without a hint of earlier grace. Her spell-shades tumbled, clattering across the floor.

For a beat we both froze at the raw display. Then Faith rose.

Her eyes stopped me cold: golden irises shot through with pulsing red, each throb in time with some hidden rhythm. Even across the room I saw her pupils flare. A tang of citrus hit my tongue—sharp, unreal.

"What the fuck?" Faith barked.

"Calm down—please," I managed.

"How did you do that? How do you know all that?" She stormed closer; for a moment I thought I'd have to shove her again.

She stopped an arm's length away—close enough for heat to radiate off her—just as the surge bled out of me.

Hands up, I stammered, "I don't know! It's the first time anything like this has happened!"

The scrubbers wound down. Faith exhaled, breath so hot I swore the air shimmered between us.

"Listen, kid. If you pull something like that again, I won't be so forgiving."

That was her forgiving? Trying to claw my eyes out?

"Then maybe clear some things up," I said, lowering my arms. "So we don't have another misunderstanding."

She bent, scooped up her shades, and slid them on. For a split second the lenses flared with inner light, then dulled. Her scowl deepened.

"Not here," she said. "Too many people."

"What, afraid someone's spying on us?" I asked, letting a little tension slip.

She scoffed. "No. It's just too loud."

I glanced around the empty hall—only the hum of spell heaters and the groan of old pipes.
“Right.”

//ERR: DATA PURGED

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

She led me to the nineteenth floor, tracing a path eerily close to the one I’d taken to meet the Arbiter. That alone set my nerves on edge.

The flat dwarfed any quarters I’d seen for a Warden. An entire wall was a spell-forged window opening onto the Hall’s superstructure. The air ran hot and sharper than the rest of the Tower, carrying a faint scent of firewood.

She gestured to a leather couch angled toward an enormous TV, the window framing the view like a painting. “Take a seat. I’m going to change.”

I didn’t argue. A few moments alone were worth more than defiance. Wordless, I crossed the flat and sank into the couch. The leather gave—thick, supple, unfamiliar. If I had to wager, Icistav’i: hide from some beast spawned in the Lost War.

Faith returned quicker than expected. Shorts traded for full leggings, the largest shirt I’d ever seen—easily half a dozen sizes too big. Still stylish. I wasn’t a fan of Mageslayer, but this one repped Dragon Corpse.

To my dismay, even without makeup she was breathtaking. Maybe that said more about my tastes than her looks.

“You’re joining my task force next week,” she said, dropping the words like a hammer.

I was so blindsided I didn't think before blurting, "Fuck."

//RSP: PLAYBACK TERMINATED

Chapter 7

~A field of a thousand swords covered in the blood of your forefathers.

The Phantom called.

We will have our due Faith.~

Not once in my life had I been caught so off guard. I'd been surprised before—lost in the deeper end of my fading, overwhelmed by futures I couldn't quite track. Even then I could usually scrape together a few crumbs of meaning from the chaos.

Then came Vassago. From the moment he shoved me, I was hyper-aware of everything he did—every twitch, every blink. At first I struck back out of anger, but as the heat drained away, I realized how unnervingly new it all felt around him. Being near him didn't just blind me to his future—it dulled everyone else's as well, their possibilities sinking to a faint murmur. For the first time, I could speak without already knowing the ending. Even losing that fight to him had been exhilarating. White Gods above, these past few days had been the best of my life.

Vassago however was an infuriating smart-ass, too good at reading me for his own good.

A week slipped by after we met, long enough for Gabriel to seize control of our training regiment. PT every morning at five-thirty, then classes. Before Vassago, classes had been nothing—cheating my way through them by pulling answers out of the future until I had a grade worth showing. But with him fogging the lines, I actually had to sit there and listen.

Afternoons were for shooting practice with Taylor, something I'd never had much talent for. Vassago, of course, learned faster than anyone had a right to, doubling my scores by the end of the week. And then came sparring.

That was the real wake-up call. I wasn't allowed to lean on any powers in the arena but my fortune telling, and by some "coincidence" Vassago always ended up there for my matches. What followed was a series of beatings harder than anything I'd ever taken. And still—I couldn't get enough of it. Failure was rare, failure was new, and anything new made me feel alive.

"Faith," Vassago called out.

He'd waited until after my unceremonious loss in the ring to approach me. How very careful of him.

"Vassago." I wiped the blood and sweat from my face. The young cleric was already fussing over my wounds, red-faced as ever since the day she'd started here.

Vassago frowned at her, disapproval written plain.

"Jealous?" I teased.

He scoffed. "More like worried."

I waved the girl away. Whatever this was, it wasn't for her ears. "What do you want, Vassago?"

His eyes swept the room first. He always did that—whether he was about to share what he had for breakfast or one of the Tower's darkest secrets. "I need your help with something."

A smile tugged at my lips. The first time he'd ever asked me for anything. I was going to savor this.

"A lot of people need my help. What makes you special?"

He had figured out he had some effect on me, but not what it truly was—or how much it changed everything. The day he realized that, he'd never stop lording it over me. Until then, I might as well wring him for all he was worth.

"I'm your teammate. That makes me special." His grin was every bit as infuriating as mine.

"And what are you willing to give me for help?" I leaned back against the wall, shoulder pressed to the sheet rock.

"Shooting lessons."

That brat. I shoved down the heat rising in my chest. A week of training side by side with Vassago had made one thing painfully clear—he could read me far too easily. Every twitch, every shift in tone, even tells like the way I flushed. Worse, everyone else had noticed how much lighter I seemed since he showed up, and they'd decided it must be because I had feelings for him.

Maybe I did. Wanting to shove my thumbs into his eyes was still a feeling, wasn't it?

"Get on with it before I change my mind."

"You're a saint," he said, smug as ever, already savoring victory in this little exchange. "The Arbiter gave me a mission last week. I'm supposed to make sense of the data I pulled from the MT warehouse. I've got an idea where to start, but I need someone with a broader view—if you get my meaning."

"You'll have to give me more than that," I countered.

"Not until I hear you agree."

I pushed off the wall and stepped in close, using my height to look down on him. "Got another Soothsayer lined up who can help you?"

"Yeeesssss..." he drawled, clearly lying.

I let the silence stretch until he finally sighed, conceding defeat. Round to me.

“Fine. I’m trying to trace the flow of some equipment by combing through MT comm traffic, comparing certain keywords they used to describe it.” He turned and headed for the exit, expecting me to follow. Vassago always did this—talking on the move, pacing like he was mid-phone call.

“The warehouse stored some of the gear before it got shipped off. If I can match the coded terms to the stuff I saw there, I might be able to crack their system.”

“Let me stop you right there.” My eyes stayed fixed on the empty hall ahead. I hated meeting his gaze. He was the first person I’d ever met who could actually read me—who wasn’t blinded by fear or dulled by indifference.

“I can’t divine the future of inanimate objects—it has to have a soul.”

Vassago rubbed his chin as we walked, the elevator doors sliding open to interrupt our talk.

We had a choice: the ninth floor arena meant switching elevators before reaching my flat, which was far more comfortable than the sterile meeting room on the eighth. Vassago, though, usually preferred the meeting room—claimed my place made him uneasy.

Without even thinking, he jabbed the button for the second floor. His floor.

Halfway down, he snapped out of his fog and realized what he’d done.

“Shit. Sorry. We can go to your place this time if you want.”

“Why?” I asked, smiling as I tasted the shift in him. “Isn’t your room on the second floor? We can just go there and finish our talk.”

His face drained, hesitation flashing plain. “Uh... no. It’s fine, really. We can go to your place.”

Blood. In. The. Water.

I let the silence stretch, savoring it, before I slid the blade home. “Going all the way back up, switching elevators, wasting time... unless, of course, you’ve got something to hide.” My tone was light, playful, but edged sharp enough to draw blood.

He groaned, cornered. “Fine. But I don’t want to hear any complaints later.”

I grinned, victory sweet on my tongue. There was nothing more intoxicating than watching him squirm.

~Time slipped between my fingers for but a fleeting moment.~

Vassago's room was more closet than living space, and not a tidy one. Clothes littered the floor, the bed was a tangle of sheets, and papers were scattered across the desk. At least there wasn't food rotting or trash piled in the corners. Only one wooden chair stood between the two of us.

"Gods above, you gawking at my room is worse than you pinning me in a fight," Vassago muttered, clearing a spot on the bed to sit.

"You can take the chair."

I glanced from the chair to him. "This place is disgusting."

"You insisted," he said with a shrug, utterly unbothered. "Stand if you like."

The arena had worn me out, and the chair looked clean enough. I dropped into it.

"Alright—out with it."

"Some of the guards from the warehouse," he said. "If you knew their names, could you find what we need?"

"We?" I raised a brow.

He faltered. A flicker of anger crossed his face before he forced it flat again. Even without the Way Lines singing it to me, I savored it.

"What I need," he corrected, tone flat. "Can you get what I need?"

"With full names, yes. It'll take time."

"And if it's only first names?"

I scoffed. "I'm probably the best Soothsayer Valago has ever seen, Vassago. Yes, I can do it—but that depends on your timetable, and what you're willing to pay."

He paled. "Money's not the kind of payment you're after, is it?"

Elbow on the armrest, head tilted, I let a crooked smile spread across my face. "No."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, brows drawn tight. "What is it you want?"

"Not sure yet. Maybe I'll save the favor for later."

"How about an excuse to cut lessons for a whole week?" he countered.

Tempting. The new schedule was grating in ways I hadn't expected. With Vassago near, the constant roar of futures dwindled to a low hum. For the first time in years I could sleep—real,

uninterrupted sleep. I could still call on my sight if I focused, but the involuntary ones were almost gone. A week off would probably be the best week of my life. But that was mine to know.

The new schedule after Vassago joined grated on me for new reasons. With him around, my life had fallen into a strange kind of peace. Real sleep, for the first time in years. Only a dull thrum of visions instead of the endless roar. I could still call on my sight if I focused, but the involuntary ones were almost gone. I wanted to revel in that calm. Instead, classes and drills kept us running twelve hours a day. A week off would probably be the best week of my life. But Vassago didn't need to know that.

"Maybe," I said airily. "Depends on what you've got."

"I know the first names of two guards. One's Alkear, the other's Vallery."

Black Gods. Alkear. A name pulled straight from the codex. While I couldn't prove it, people branded with those names were always unbearably proud of it. Ackeron—one of my sparring partners—was proof enough.

"Vallery seemed too lax to matter," Vassago went on. "But Alkear was sharp—sharp for a minimum-wage guard on the outskirts, anyway."

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, forearms hanging loose. Even with my shades on, his gaze pinned me, as if he knew where my eyes had gone. He didn't. I'd averted them.

"He said he wanted to join the Wardens. Might be a good fit."

"Should probably just nab him," I said offhandedly. "If you want results instantly, all I need is a touch. Won't last long, but if you write it down quick, you'll have what you need."

Vassago's face twisted like he'd bitten something rotten. "You want to just yank people off the street like thugs?"

"Is that wrong?" I frowned. "Wardens do it all the time. And it sounds like you want answers fast. It's the quickest way."

Was he... squeamish about this?

"No," he said, voice hardening. "I've had too many friends taken like that—dragged off, broken, left fucked for life. I may wear the uniform, Faith, but I won't become a glorified thug like you."

The edge in his voice cut deeper than anything I'd heard from him before. It wasn't just irritation. This was anger with roots.

I laughed lightly. I liked this side of him—stripped of the feigned smiles and careful cunning.

"Then what would you have us do, Vassago?"

“Well, he wants to be a Warden, and he stammered like an idiot around Shara. I’m sure you could convince him to come in for a bit.”

“Is that an off-handed compliment I hear?” I teased.

“It’s too bad you’ve got the personality of an O’rok—and a fucked-up head.”

I sat up straighter, teeth grinding against the anger bubbling up. “Too bad you’ve got all the backbone of a wet noodle and the looks of a Lost War skeleton.”

“You’re really only proving my point,” he said, brushing the insult aside like it was nothing.

I let it slide, for now, and shifted back to the matter at hand. “Why even bring him in? Like I said, I just need to touch him. If he’s as... easy-going as you say, it shouldn’t be hard.”

“Because interrogating him during work hours is going to look suspicious.” Vassago straightened, then let out a slow breath. “Look, it can’t be that difficult for you to convince him to visit the Tower. Just flash the badge—you’re a Warden.”

He laced his fingers together and leaned back against the wall, the narrow bed making it easy for him to sprawl with feigned ease. “And as much as I’d like to tag along and make sure it goes smoothly, I’m worried he might recognize me.”

Unacceptable. Going outside the Tower—or even uptown to my flat—was impossible. Without Way Line scrubbers, mania hit me in hours, not weeks. The trip to that warehouse alone could be enough to unravel me. But with Vassago at my side? He was a panacea I’d never tested outside the Tower, but one I couldn’t afford to pass up.

“I’m not going alone,” I said flatly.

Confusion flickered across his face. “What are you worried about? I mean, I haven’t seen you win a single round in the arena. But out there you’d be outnumbered, your opponents armed, and covered head-to-toe in armor.”

I twitched. He was the only reason I hadn’t won a single round all week. The upside was I got to fight in the arena more often, so it was a bittersweet pill to swallow.

“My safety isn’t the concern. Tower bitch won’t let me leave unless it’s by order from her or the Officer Board.”

“Tower bitch?” he repeated.

“The Arbiter,” I clarified.

A grin tugged at his lips, just enough to flash teeth. “I like it.” He let the approval hang in the air for half a beat before moving on. “I’m not confident I can convince anyone else to go with you.

But the odds of Alkear recognizing me are slim. I wore a mask when I was captured, and I didn't speak until he was out of earshot—at least from what I remember.”

He pushed up from the bed and started pacing the cramped space, his sunken features set in sharp concentration.

The Tower had been good for him. Still scrawny, but three meals a day and steady exercise were beginning to show through.

“How long do you think you could be gone without anyone noticing?” he asked.

“Depends on the day.” I turned the chair around and flipped through the mess of papers on his desk while his focus was elsewhere. “During the work week, maybe a few hours. On the weekend, maybe a whole day if I've got some scheduled excuse. But I'm guessing this isn't the kind of thing you want run up to the Officer Board.”

He didn't bother confirming. His silence was enough.

“How often do you have those excuses?”

“Only when my father drags me to some debutante ball or other hollow political peacocking. Not often.”

“Does the Arbiter usually know about it beforehand? Or see proof?”

I scoffed. “I'm a Faber, not a piece of Warden equipment on loan to my father, much as I hate the man. If she wanted to, she could dig into it and find out whether the excuse holds. But why would she waste her time?”

He nodded to himself, a thought slotting into place. “Doesn't matter. She'll let it slide if it's me.”

I froze.

The Arbiter didn't bend rules. She didn't coddle or play favorites. Not with me, not with anyone. Her leash on the Tower was iron—for her to loosen it, for him? No.

That grin of his wasn't just confidence. It was knowledge. He knew something about her, something big enough that even the Arbiter would turn her head.

So. I wasn't the only one hiding things.

“If the Arbiter doesn't test your story, then the Board won't either. It's settled.” He spoke with calm finality. “This weekend, we'll go and have a talk with Alkear.”

I leaned back in the chair, masking the churn of my thoughts behind a crooked smile. He thought he'd closed the matter. But now I had a new question—and I wasn't letting go until I had my answer.

~Rising like a vengeful army, my sight was eclipsed my madness.~

Chapter 8

//NAME: VASSAGO AEIDER

//CIN: 180-65-3564

//AGE: 20

//SEX: MALE

...

//CMD: INITIALIZE PLAYBACK OF F5

Surviving the week proved harder than I expected. Faith got sharper in the ring during our second week together and tried everything to drag me into it. I already had enough on my hands with Shara rearranging my face twice a week and the trainers putting me through hell.

I'd started noticing odd changes from the high-intensity regimen. No mage healer was called for me—not that I could have pried one off Faith's side anyway. Still, by morning my bruises, cuts, and pains faded without magical mending. Strength came to me in ways training couldn't explain. I needed less sleep, ate less, tired less from exercise, and my thoughts moved quicker and cleaner. No one else noticed—except Faith. Her scowl deepened with every passing day.

That morning I stood in the communal bathroom, brushing my teeth. Warden fatigue fit better than they had two weeks ago; features that had been sunken looked sharper, less bony. Even Del said I looked better.

I spat, rinsed, and muttered something about the Mourning Star.

"You going somewhere?" Del slid up beside me at the sink, a black tank top showing off his traps. His hair, usually tucked under a cap, was a messy black that somehow read rugged rather than sloppy. Wish I could pull that off.

"Yeah. You could say that."

"Vague as ever," he said, sassily.

"You my mother or something?" I shot back.

"Might as well be, with all the trouble I've kept you out of," he riposted.

I nicked myself shaving and set the blade down, glaring at him in the mirror. He wore thin gray shorts that framed his legs. Why did everyone I knew look hotter than me?

"What do you want?" I asked.

"To know what you're up to. You've been acting strange all week." He turned on the tap. "Most of them haven't been around you long enough to see the signs, and Shara couldn't care less. But I think you're planning something."

“And what would you do if I told you?” I dabbed the cut with a rag from my kit.

“Depends on what it was.”

“And that’s exactly why I’m not telling you.”

“I could always bring it up with Gabriel,” he threatened.

I narrowed my eyes at his reflection.

He sighed. “Just don’t get yourself hurt. I wouldn’t call us friends, but you’re a decent sort—and you’ve done better here than I expected.”

I gave him nothing. Silence hung a beat, then he left the bathroom.

//ERR: CORRUPT DATA

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

Faith waited just outside the squad-car bay. A grey long-sleeve sweater, rolled up to bare her midriff, read *WAREATER*—another metal band. Baggy, ripped jeans hung low enough to show off her wide hips, and Astrelle slides hugged her feet.

“Kept you waiting?” I called as I strode up.

“Everyone keeps me waiting. I can see the future.” She glanced at me and froze.

“What?” I looked down and tugged at my shirt, checking the wrinkles for anything her gaze might have caught.

“Those are your fatigues.”

“Yeah...”

“You can’t go into town wearing that.” Her tone cut the conversation off like finality itself.

I huffed and let the shirt slide from my fingers. “I’m not exactly flush with options right now.”

“You can borrow some of mine for now. We’ll get you your own tomorrow.” She turned toward the bay and the stairs to her room, already deciding as she walked.

“Faith, we don’t have time for this. It’ll take hours to get across town, and going up to your room will add—Gods know how much.” I hurried to match her stride.

Keeping her eyes forward, she side-eyed me from behind her spellshades. “I didn’t make it a request, noodle-man.”

Lately she’d taken to calling me pasta names because they ticked me off—she liked that they got under my skin.

“Faith.” I lowered my voice as much as I could and tried for command.

She stopped and turned. Gods, she was tall.

“Vassago,” she said, challenging.

“Not everything revolves around you and what you want.” My anger simmered just beneath the surface. She was the only person who could get me this hot-headed so fast.

“Maybe not. What are you going to do about it, spaghetti-man?” She stepped closer, using her height like leverage.

My skin buzzed at the closeness—hornets in a jar. Her perfume was earthy today, like bark and wet leaves.

I couldn’t beat her in a fight; she knew it and used it to lord over me. I breathed out, trying to let the heat go, but it sat in me, simmering.

//RSP: SPIKE DETECTED

“Nothing.” I looked up at her, seeing my own reflection in her shades. “I’ll see you next week, I guess.”

I turned on my heel and made it only a few steps before a jolt of ice shot through my wrist.

//RSP: LEVELS RISING

Faith spun me around, face twisted with anger as a bolt of power made every atom in me buzz.

“Let go!” I said—half command, half plea.

“You don’t just walk away from me, Vassago. I’ve been nice to you up to now. Do you even realize how the fuck I am?” Vitriol coated each word; my vision sharpened until the world felt impossibly clear.

//CMD: RESTORE PRIME DIRECTIVE

I ripped my arm free so fast I surprised myself. My fist slammed into the bay’s concrete wall and blasted a chunk loose.

We stood crooked in the silence that followed, stunned by the force of it. I stared at my hand, expecting ruin—blood, bone—but nothing. Not even a scratch.

I rubbed my fist, then looked back at Faith.

“I’m going now,” I said, trying for steady. “Are you coming or not?”

For a beat, the air grew hot—an echo of Way Lines tugged by her anger. She'd gotten better at masking the pull lately, but without scrubbers nearby, the edge showed.

Her knuckles whitened, then relaxed as she drew a long breath. "Did you plan on walking all the way there?" she asked, almost mocking.

"If I had to," I said flatly, refusing to meet her eyes.

"We can take my Durathane."

//ERR: CORRUPT DATA

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

Faith's silver Durathane was as antique as it was powerful. A ram-air intake curved from the hood, dark lines traced the contours to sharpen every edge, and a low spoiler sealed the industrial muscle-car look.

She drew a magic stone from her pocket and spoke a Runic command word—the language of the Soloms. The aether engine roared to life like a tiger hungry for the road, its doors lifting skyward like silver wings gleaming in the sun.

Inside, the seats were wrapped in red Icistav'i leather—the same as her couch. The fittings were lacquered redwood banded with mithril, and at the heart of the dash sat a golem-spell sentience, outlawed by the Vizier after the fall of the Lich ZerrKullCarr.

Stripping the car for parts would fetch millions. The mithril alone, tucked away in places no one checked, was worth a fortune. Maybe the passenger-side dash. Maybe later.

"No," Faith said, cutting into my thoughts. "I don't need to read your mind to know what you're thinking, noodle."

"I was just admiring the upholstery," I muttered, eyes shifting to the window as she pulled onto the road.

The minutes that followed were quiet. I reached for the radio, but Faith stopped me with a single word.

"Don't."

She didn't explain, and for once I didn't push. Whatever storm had passed between us earlier seemed far behind her now.

I rested my head on my elbow against the door and watched her reflection in the glass. Her shoulders hung easy, her grip on the wheel was light, her breathing steady. She looked utterly at peace, as if the weight she always carried had slipped free for a moment.

It was the calmest I had ever seen her—and in that silence, with nothing but the road ahead, it felt safe. Like being let in on a secret side of her no one else saw.

“You’re quiet,” I said before I could stop myself.

Silence answered, and a prickling dread rose. Would I regret this for the rest of the week? Was she drawing it out to watch me squirm?

A sigh broke the tension. “I know.”

Her hands slid up the wheel, settling at its top as she pressed deeper into the seat, like she needed grounding.

“But—” I started.

“But nothing. It’s been a long time since I had a quiet moment. I’d like to enjoy it.”

Didn’t she have her own room—soundproofing, space enough for half a dozen dorms? How could she not have quiet? We trained twelve hours a day, sure, but outside of that I couldn’t imagine anyone bothering her.

I wrestled with the urge to press. She wanted silence; poking holes in it would be the exact opposite of what she asked. But this might be the only time she’d be in a mood to let me in.

“Do you have more training after I leave?”

Her thumbs rubbed the wheel hard enough to make the leather creak. “No, it’s—” She cut herself off, weighing her words. “I’m sure you’ve noticed, but I’m not exactly like the other Soothsayers.”

“Really?” I said, sarcasm thick.

“Maybe this was a mistake.”

“Wait—no. I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist after all the hell you’ve given me.”

Her signature silence stretched, then she moved on. “My visions are more powerful. Harder to control. The scrubbers help, but eventually even they can’t keep up—and I Fade.”

Faith was already Fading? Even I knew what that meant. Most mages never reached the kind of power needed to Fade—never lost their grip on reality until madness set in. The ones who did usually broke much later in life, not in their early twenties.

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Faith had to be stronger than any Soothsayer I'd heard of. Maybe stronger than ZerrKullCarr. No wonder she was always on edge.

"How are you still..." I began.

"Sane?" she finished.

That was arguable, I almost said, but I shut my mouth.

I could feel the side-eye. "The spellshades slow the Fading in ways the scrubbers can't. And pain helps—pushes the visions back. Didn't matter if I was giving it or taking it."

So that's what happened to Taylor.

But something didn't add up. If her explanation was true, it shouldn't be this quiet now. Sure, she'd taken her dose of pain recently, but outside the scrubbers things should have been worse. If this was the first real moment of peace she'd had all week, then something else was working.

She hadn't left the Tower without dragging me along. Maybe it wasn't about needing company. Maybe it was me.

When she touched me, I'd felt a rush—strength, clarity. What if I'd been drawing it from her all along? Maybe I was blinding her third eye just by being near.

"This is the first time you've had something like this in a while?"

Faith knew I'd cornered her. She wasn't good at hiding feelings, but she'd gotten better at reading me.

She exhaled, fists twisting on the wheel. The war on her face—contemplation, hesitation—ended with a reluctant choice. "Yes," she said.

"It's me, isn't it? The reason you're not Fading."

"Yes." The word tasted bitter and frustrated.

Power surged through me at the admission. I could lord this over her for the rest of our lives if I wanted.

Good soldiers don't fight out of fear or lack of options—they fight for something more. That's what the Arbiter said. And while I wasn't her biggest fan, sometimes she made sense.

"You're afraid I'll use my ability against you," I said before I realized I'd spoken.

The heat returned, sweat beading at my brow.

"I'm not afraid of you," Faith said, low and hostile. "I've survived without the quiet this long. I can live without it."

"You're upset I can give you something you can't take for yourself."

My skin buzzed, caught between my ability and the heat radiating off her. She slammed a fist into the wheel; the crack was loud enough to suggest broken bones.

"You don't know the first damn thing about me, Vassago. Don't pretend you're suddenly my psychiatrist."

"You're right—I don't know shit about you. But you're not making it easy."

"I don't fucking want you to understand!"

Her scream swallowed the cabin. The spell-heater's hum and the engine's low rumble died under it.

There was more to say, but nothing left either of us would hear.

So I turned to the window, cast my thoughts outward, and kept my silence for the rest of the ride.

//ERR: CORRUPT DATA

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST STABLE DATA

The doors of Faith's Durathane opened with smooth silence, and we stepped out into the vast parking lot outside the squat, concrete structure. I glanced toward where I'd seen the crow earlier—the traces of the corpse it had fed on were long gone.

"Why couldn't you rob a place closer to town? This place smells like you."

I shot her a glare, but she didn't seem to notice.

We made our way to the reception office. A small, dark-haired woman sat behind a marble-topped desk.

She gave us a hollow smile. "Good morning. How can I help you?" Her voice was high, chipper, practiced.

Before I could take the lead, Faith cut in. "The guards that work the night shift. Who are they?"

Without even a flicker of surprise or irritation, the receptionist replied, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm not at liberty to discuss the private information of employees."

Faith sighed, sharp and frustrated, and reached across the desk for the woman's face. My hand shot out, intercepting hers.

The same spike of hot power rushed into me through the contact, but this time I was ready for it. Faith flinched, her head snapping toward me, silent fury in her eyes. The demand that I let go hovered between us.

I released her. Her arm dropped back to her side.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I said quickly. "We're with the Wardens."

I drew a badge from my jacket—a steel slate shaped like a waving banner, carved with the red six-pointed star of the Wardens.

The corners of her eyes drew up in surprise, but otherwise she was unreadable.

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I drew a badge from my jacket—a steel slate shaped like a waving banner, carved with the red six-pointed star of the Wardens.

Her eyes flickered with surprise, though the rest of her face remained unreadable.

"My apologies, Warden." She rose and came around the desk. "I can take you to a waiting room while I call the manager."

She was more than just well-trained. Something about her manner was off. No employee was that decisive unless they'd been prepared for it.

I shot Faith a glance. Her foot tapped against the floor, her face tight with restrained anger. The shades shadowed her eyes, but when she tilted her head toward me, I knew she was watching.

"How long will this take?" Faith asked, her tone straining toward polite.

"Half an hour at most," the receptionist said. Again, just a little too polished. "If that's too much, I can schedule an appointment for later, if you prefer."

"No, it's fine. Take us to the waiting area," I answered.

//ERR: DATA NOT FOUND

//RSP: STARTING AT SOONEST AVAILABLE DATA

The meeting room matched the rest of the building, only softened by a few potted plants in the corners. Old fabric couches lined the walls; a low table sat between them. Faith had already planted herself on one couch, splaying out to take up the whole two-seater. Taking the seat across would force me to sit with the man I'd robbed; sliding in next to Faith would probably get me bitten. So I stood by her couch like Kiral's weakest bodyguard.

Faith reached over the table and plucked a peppermint from the glass bowl at the center. She unwrapped it with an elegance I didn't think she had, then popped it into her mouth.

I didn't see it, but I felt it through her spellshades. My skin prickled wherever her gaze passed, and when she caught me staring a broad smile split her face before the candy crunched between her teeth.

"We have visitors," she said, low and heavy.

"Multiple?" I asked.

"Yes—four by my count. Armed. Trying to kill us."

"And that's a good thing?" I said, watching her smile widen as I assumed the hostiles drew nearer.

"Yes." She shrugged as I racked my pistol and pressed my back to the wall.

She didn't move from the couch. Calmly, she took another candy from the bowl and ate it. My ears picked up every sound—still keyed by the power I'd siphoned from her earlier.

Footsteps in the hall: three, maybe four sets. I'd hedge my bets on Faith being right.

"You sure they want to kill us?" I asked.

"In most of my visions they blow your head off with a shotgun if I just lie here and let them." Her voice was dry.

A pit opened in my stomach.

She laughed at the fear on my face. "I'm joking... mostly."

The footsteps stopped outside the door. The four men traded words in Waric and knocked.

Faith rose, tossed one last peppermint into her mouth, and strode to the door. "Well, guess it's time to start the party!"

//RSP: PLAYBACK TERMINATED

Chapter 9

//NAME: VASSAGO AEIDER

//CIN: 180-65-3564

//AGE: 20

//SEX: MALE

...

//CMD: INITIALIZE PLAYBACK OF F6

Faith swung the door open as the men on the other side shouted in a foreign tongue. She lunged at the first like a tiger, hands clamping for his face, ready to rip it apart.

The other three scrambled to react, raising their weapons to blast her, but my gun was already up.

I'd only ever fired my pistol with hearing protection. Firing indoors now left my ears screaming, the world shattering into a high-pitched ring.

I forced myself to focus as two of them moved to level their shotguns, stepping in to carve me in half. My pistol snapped toward the closest, movements quick and practiced. Taylor would have smiled at the efficiency. Three rounds cracked out. Two punched into his chest, the last tore through his throat, blood spilling like an upended cup.

But my luck broke.

The last man had finished his movement. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger.

Blood streamed from his ears and nose as he screamed, the sound raw with terror, his body writhing in agony no bullet had caused.

Like the shadow of death, Faith rose from the mangled wreck of the man she'd seized first. Blood soaked her from crown to chest, her shades gone, revealing gold-and-red eyes pulsing with unnatural light.

"Fuck," she breathed, voice quivering with ecstasy.

I made the mistake of looking down at her victim.

Her fingers had sunk deep into the hollow of his throat, raking out whatever they could find—bone, tendon, artery, nothing spared.

Ler'olen Arkanthos... she wasn't human. She was a monster.

She leaned over and scooped her shades off the floor, wiping blood from her face and glasses with the jacket of the man she'd killed before slipping them back on.

"There's more," she said, breathing hard—not from exertion, but from the pleasure of it.

"Twenty? No—thirty. Spread out through the warehouse and closing on us." She smiled, showing blood-smeared teeth. She'd bitten him.

I fought to keep my bearings. "There's open ground between us and your car. They'll have a clear line of sight to gun us down."

"Tell me what I want to hear, noodle," she teased, blood flecking her lips.

"We're going to have to kill them if we want to get to your car."

"Let's take a detour to the receptionist while we're at it."

"No!" I snapped. Her face fell at the command. "Excuse me?" she said.

Two men rounded the corner at the far end of the hall. I dove sideways and tackled Faith back into the waiting room.

"Grack Arkah!" one of them yelled.

Bullets peppered the other side of the brick wall. From the sound and pitch my sharpened hearing picked up, only one of them fired a pistol.

"Faith!" I screamed over the hail. "Can you scramble their brains like you did the other guy?"

"Too far!" she shouted back. "My powers are dampened by you. I'd need to be right next to them."

I went prone and fired from behind the doorframe, waiting for a pause in the shooting. The pistol locked back at the far end of the hall—then I risked a peek. One of the men was advancing while the other covered him. The forward man flinched in sudden pain and dropped hard as I fired two rounds into him and ripped his face apart; bone and blood sprayed the floor.

"You're welcome!" Faith howled above the firefight, clearly having the time of her life.

I snatched a fallen shotgun from the floor and fired two rounds down the hall—lead slugs tearing chunks from the wall. I pulled back into cover, breathing hard, when the remaining agent returned fire.

"I thought you couldn't fuck with their heads!" I yelled.

"He ran closer! It's not like I killed him—just a little push!" she shouted back.

I slid my pistol and an extra magazine across the floor to her. "Cover me!"

Without hesitation she leveled the pistol and fired out the door without looking. I charged the hall, seizing a second shotgun as Faith's rounds cracked beside me with surgical accuracy.

The cover the agent used didn't stand a chance. I rounded the corner fast; his eyes went wide as he barked into the message-stone at his collar.

BANG.

The shotgun report split the air. The slug tore his jaw and neck to shreds—meat and bone splattering the walls. He gurgled once, blood sluicing onto the floor, then went still.

I racked the shotgun empty, grabbed the shells, and dropped the empty weapon. Faith was already on me, running the hall and glancing down at the ruin we'd made.

"Nice," she said, casual, like we'd just finished a chore.

I shoved extra slugs into my pocket and wiped blood off my hands and the barrel. "Where are the rest of them?"

"Not sure," she said. "The pain and your power are fogging my sight. I can't tell until they get closer."

I walked over to the man whose head I'd smashed to pieces with a lead slug, biting down at the rising bile at the sight, and looted his body for ammo. Luckily these agents used the same pistol the Wardens used. I tossed the extra mags to Faith and we made out way to the warehouse floor.

"I remember where the divination network server room is. If we can get there and smash it up we can blind them." I said huffing as we ran through the halls.

"You are just saying all the things I love to hear today. Kill everyone, smash everything. You really know how to make a girl blush." Faith said without even the slightest bit of red on her cheeks besides the blood of her enemies.

I heard weapons racking around the corner, and grabbed Faith before she could press on. The flood of power sharpening my senses and confirming I was right.

She shot a look at me but didn't complain.

"Keep an eye on the corner." I told her and looked through the window of a nearby door.

The room was dark and filled with old cardboard boxes, electrical parts, and mundane enchanted items. At the room's far wall was another door that lead to another hallway that I bet would lead behind them.

I tried the handle. Locked. No pick set on me, but I had something quicker.

“Think you can hold that corner?” I asked.

Faith scoffed. “You may be draining me, noodle, but I can still tell when they’re about to push that corner. Even a novice Soothsayer could pull that off.”

I leveled the shotgun on the door bolt and squeezed the trigger.

The one ounce lead cylinder shreds the machinery of the door apart, and I kicked the door open. My enhanced strength nearly took it off its hinges. I sprint through the room with speed I had never had before racking the shotgun and peeking the hallway in the direction of the agents I heard.

Two of them had already moved to intercept me hearing what I was doing, but not expecting me to be so fast.

Before the first one could react I fired center mass at him. The agent had a bullet proof vest on, but it wasn’t rated for slugs.

The slug hit him with enough force to lift him off his feet and slam him to the floor.

I pulled back into the room, racking the weapon right before his partner started firing at me. The air snapped angrily where I had just been standing, and I fired blindly around the corner.

I racked the slide back and started loading as quickly as my training would allow, Faith scrambling into the room from the door I had initially entered from. She fired three times, the sounds of dying accompanying the drum of her gun.

“Vassago!” She yelled.

“What!”

“More from where we came from! They’re surrounding us!”

I heard the agent that had shot at me closing the distance.

I dropped low aimed high and peeked around the corner.

The slug slammed into his hip, sending him screaming to the floor.

I racked my weapon. “How many!?”

“Four more!”

Two more agents rounded the corner of my hall, assault rifles barking and air tearing as they fired.

A round punched through my upper left arm, a hot needle of pain bursting across my skin. I fell back into cover. Blood ran down my forearm, and my hands trembled around the weapon.

White Gods above, I had never felt fear like that. Gunfire roared, men screamed, and adrenaline hammered my heartbeat through every inch of me. My body chose fight over flight, and strength poured through my limbs.

Something clattered on the floor ahead, a metal cylinder spinning across the tile. A flash-bang.

“Vassago!” Faith screamed. Her hand seized my wrist a split second before the world turned white. Sound vanished, leaving a sharp ringing in its place.

Power filled me again. She was not just leaking it this time; she was feeding me. I drank deep and greedy.

// WARNING: COHERENCE INDEX FALLING

I could feel their hearts beating. I could taste their fear. They moved so slow.

My shotgun came up, the sights settling over each chest. Every pull of the trigger cut off a heartbeat. Another round punched into my right shoulder blade as more agents poured through the far door.

I turned, Faith still pouring her strength into me.

// RSP: RESTORING PRIME DIRECTIVE

I felt myself coming apart even as I grew stronger. The shotgun slipped from my hands. My arm swung through the air, cutting across where a mortal heart beat. It stopped at once. Another turned to flee, but it was like watching an ant run from a flood.

I stepped into his path. My body felt like smoke, my limbs fluid. My hand came down, and his heart stopped beneath it.

// CMD: C O N S U M E E N E R G Y

Even blind and deaf, I could sense them all. I moved like the wind. One by one, I snuffed out the mortals in my way. Each was a fleeting annoyance against my directive.

Only one remained. My sight and hearing crept back. A woman lay on the floor among the carnage, sunglasses cracked across her face.

I knew her. Didn't I?

// ERR: COHERENCE INDEX RISING

No. The directive was clear. Destroy them all.

I reached for her, ready to crush the last flicker of life, when something clicked inside my skull. A sudden recoil of thought. Recognition burned through the fog.

The room came into focus. Blood and viscera painted every surface. Bodies lay broken, torn open as if struck by some monstrous bat. Chunks of flesh clung to the ceiling and walls.

Bile surged. It burned my throat and nose as it spilled onto the floor.

“Ler’olen fucking Arkanthos,” I whispered. “What have I done?”

“V.” Faith’s voice was faint.

“Shit—Faith, are you alright?” I stopped inches from her.

If I touched her again, I would drain her dry. That much I knew.

But how was I supposed to get her out now?

I frantically searched the bloody room for something to help before spotting a cardboard box. I dumped its contents onto the floor and folded it flat beside her.

“Can you roll onto the box, Faith?” I asked, breathing hard, blood spilling from my wounds.

Like a sick and starving kitten, she rolled onto it face-down. Her wounds were deeper than flesh.

I grabbed her dropped pistol and spare magazines in one hand, then caught the edge of the box with the other. I started dragging her through the hall, leaving a long smear of blood across the tile.

I heard more agents coming and pushed myself faster, careful not to knock Faith off the box. Even shot twice, pain riddling my body, I still felt strong. Tireless. Something in me refused to quit.

```
// ERR: BUFFER OVERFLOW
```

```
// CMD: RESTART ASAP
```

```
// RSP: CONFIRM?
```

```
// CMD CONFIRM
```

```
// RSP: RESTARTING
```

I burst through the double doors into the reception room we had first entered. The woman at the desk was gone, but something else waited between me and the exit.

A robot.

It stood tall and slim, armored in black and gray spell-carved ceramic kevlar composite. I knew what it was, though I had no idea how. Knowledge poured into me from somewhere deep in my unconscious.

A third-generation combat model. Covert-ops rated. Capable of continuing to fight even if thirty percent of its components were destroyed, head included.

I set Faith down carefully. The robot watched me. Why wasn't it attacking?

In a deep, mechanical voice, it spoke. "Surrender. Directive indicates target life signs preferred continuous."

"No." My adrenaline was fading fast. Pain and exhaustion rushed in to fill the void.

"Capture attempted. Moving to decommission."

I fired at where it had been. It leapt onto the ceiling, crawling like a monstrous metal spider.

I emptied rounds into it. The robot skittered from wall to wall, avoiding each shot, closing in as it screamed in binary fury.

Terror rooted me in place as it lunged. I couldn't move without exposing Faith, but in midair it couldn't dodge. I fired until the slide locked back. The impact threw me against the floor as the machine's hand closed around my throat.

I didn't bother prying at its grip. Instead, I reloaded, pressed the pistol to its elbow, and pulled the trigger until the arm broke away in a shower of sparks.

I ducked under the next swing, saved only by the fading edge of my heightened senses. It kicked out, sweeping my legs as if I were nothing.

I hit the ground hard and rolled. Its foot smashed into the spot where I'd lain, cracking tile and stone.

I fired upward, bullets cracking through the air and chipping away at its armor. It kicked again, punting me across the room. My back slammed into the wall, ribs buckling as the breath left my lungs.

The machine marched toward me with cold patience.

I reloaded my last magazine, forced myself to my feet, and charged. It caught me easily, like a parent restraining a child. But this child had a gun.

There was a gap where the neck joined the torso. If its processors weren't in its head, then its core had to be in its chest.

I shoved the barrel into the gap and pulled the trigger. Each shot made the machine flinch. Sparks and smoke poured from the wound. The light in its eyes flickered, then went dark. My pistol clicked empty.

The robot fell to its knees, one hand still gripping at me before I tore it free.

I dropped the pistol and limped to Faith. She lay pale and motionless on the box. I grabbed the edge and dragged her toward the silver Durathane.

“Faith,” I said weakly. “The keystone.”

Her hand fumbled through a pocket, moving like a newborn’s. The stone clattered onto the floor, and she whispered the command word.

The doors lifted open as I eased her limp body into the passenger seat with the box, careful not to touch her skin. Using the car for balance, I pulled myself into the driver’s seat, every breath scraping through cracked ribs. Blood soaked my clothes, mine and others’.

In the center console, the Golem intelligence interface lit up.

“Take us to the Tower,” I said.

“Speak command word to confirm.”

The warehouse doors swung wide. More agents poured through, rifles raised.

I looked at Faith, unconscious and pale, panic clawing at my chest. There was no way I could drive like this.

“Just... fucking drive!”

“Command word accepted,” it replied.

Of course her command word was ‘*fucking drive*.’ Why wouldn’t it be?

//RSP: PLAYBACK TERMINATED

