

Blacklight

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Blacklight

by [EverflowingRiver](#)

Summary

Stories from the streets of Coredam.

Renegade

Chapter Summary

Setting the scene.

Renegade

The rain was harsh and cold; could he not have picked another night? It hardly mattered when his feet hit the alleyway's concrete paving, to which he caught the beat in his step again and kept running. The sirens were still blaring in his head when he dashed around corner after corner, just barely clinging to the bricks when he almost slipped and fell. The scathed and torn flesh on his hands barely caught his attention, when he heard it again; the light tapping of his pursuer.

Scoffing, Nick sped into a tunnel, one he had used before. It would stretch towards the other end of the block, where he could hitch a ride, or so he thought. A headache tore through his mind when he remembered where he had left his car: Too far away. He cursed under his breath as he jumped into the tunnel, closing the hatch behind himself and engaging the arbitrary lock.

Nick: "Damn it! Fuck, fuck, fuck-"

He fumbled with the phone he quickly pulled from his pocket, still jogging as he dialled his brother.

Nick: "Heyyyy, Al, would you mind?"

Alex: "Where are you? Dinner was an hour ago."

Nick: "Yeah, sorry I couldn't make it, I texted Thom-"

Alex: "Did you?"

Nick: "I didn't? Look, Al, I could really use a ride right now, quickly."

Alex: "Who are you running from?"

Nick: "You'll see when you get here."

Alex sounded a tired sigh, before audibly shrugging and loudly closing a cupboard.

Alex: "Address?"

Nick: "Raze Street- You know the spot."

Alex: "Figures. Sit tight."

Nick whispered a thank-you-made-apology, before turning his phone off, hoping that the call was not intercepted. Before long, he would make his way to the other side of the tunnel, where he turned around to face his flank- Empty. Good. His head on a swivel, he glanced over his shoulder as he backed up towards the exit. To his surprise, an electronic lock blocked the way.

"Fuck!" He hissed with fleeting breath, as he tried to make out who had placed it there; to which he frustratingly recognised the logo of ForeverTech, the largest engineering corp in town. "That is karma for you," he whispered to himself, a chuckle following when he felt the tumbling flash drive in his coat. These locks were notorious for their anti-tampering mechanisms, which had caught many an unsuspecting burglar, but Nick was not unsuspecting. *Guess I'm stuck here until Al arrives*, he thought to himself as he put his ear to the metal plating.

After only a few minutes, Nick could hear the revving of an engine he recognised. A smirk slipped onto his face as he reached into his pocket, where he found a lighter. He took a deep breath, before pulling his coat's hood over his head again and triggering the lighter, before holding the yellow flame underneath the lock. After a few moments, the lock disengaged and triggered a fire alarm. The sound made Nick's ears ring as every sprinkler in the building activated as well. A grunt tumbled off Nick's lips as he climbed out through the newly opened escape hatch, which would lead him back onto the streets.

He was relieved to find his brother's motorcycle there, where Alex held out a helmet for Nick to put on. Nick wasted no time and took the headgear, before slipping it over his face and lowering the visor. Maybe he had hoped that they would have a little more time, until the siren sounded again. It was a deafening, alien noise that escaped from the vents of the peacekeeper's ribbed armour. There was no call to halt, no warning of arrest; Nick knew that if they lingered just a moment longer, they would be torn to shreds by a rifle. "Kick it!" He shouted, to which Alex wasted not another moment.

Alex hit the gas for all it had, sending the machine into a screeching gallop. Alex bobbed and weaved through the late night traffic, until they were far enough out of sight to catch their breath.

Nick: "Alex, I-"

Alex: "Check the damn bike for trackers."

Alex' commanding tone always could tear through any fabric, and Nick knew better than to fight him then, so he reared his head and started carefully checking the cycle's frame for tracking devices as they drove down the freeway.

Nick: "None on the back, but Alex-"

Alex: "I don't want to hear it. Not here. Now keep your head down, for Nöll's sake."

Nick did as he was asked and kept his gaze on his brother's back, as they drove all the way to the other side of town. Alex would not slow down one bit, until they left the freeway and pulled into the suburbs on the outskirts of Coredam. It would take no more than another minute or two for them to turn into the driveway of their childhood home, where the garage door responded to their arrival and opened up on its own. Alex carefully brought the bike to a halt and waited for Nick to get off, before doing the same. Nick removed his helmet and placed it on a workbench that stood by the wall. Alex was soon to follow, his deep blue eyes piercing the night as he sought eye contact with his brother, which Nick stubbornly denied.

Still, he said nothing as he nudged Nick out of the garage and had the door close behind them, before opening the home's front door and heading inside. Nick was the one to close the door this time, hesitant to hang up his coat in case he was still being kicked out. Alex had already left the hall and headed into the dining room, but Nick lingered for a moment, thinking of anything and everything he could say. After a few moments, he fixed his blond hair as much as he could and decided to hang up his coat anyway. After that, he headed after his brother, into the dining room where Alex was taking the dishes into the kitchen.

Alex stacked four dirty plates onto a clean one, before picking them up and leaving an empty table behind. Nick briefly checked the living room, yet could not see Thomas, the youngest, anywhere. He figured that Thom had simply gone to bed. Nick hesitated once more, before carefully following Alex into the kitchen, where the water was running. Alex was scrubbing the plates he had brought in just a few moments ago, glancing over his shoulder only briefly when Nick walked in.

Alex: "You're a mess."

Nick: "You love me when I'm a mess."

Alex scoffed, shaking his head as he stacked the now clean plates. He was nothing if not efficient.

Nick: "You still love me, right?"

Alex: "You stole from a corp. Again."

Nick: "You know as well as I do that-"

Alex: "I know what's at stake, which is exactly why I can't have you keep doing this, not when you live under this roof!"

That last part was what hurt Nick. He would have left, if he could.

Nick: "That's not fair and you know it."

Alex: "What's not fair is that you keep putting Thomas in danger. We had a deal."

Nick: "I haven't forgotten."

Alex: "Then act like it!"

The silence was deafening.

Alex: "Who is it for this time?"

Nick: "The Collective."

Alex: "You are running for those rats again?"

Nick: "They are not rats."

Alex: "They will just sell the damn thing to the Militia!"

Nick: "I would bloody hope so!"

Alex: "I can't believe that you're okay with that."

Nick: "Dad would have supported me."

Alex: "Yeah, well, if you keep this up you can ask him what he thinks of it."

Nick: "I'm going to bed."

Just as Nick started to turn around and leave, Alex grasped his arm tightly and yanked him back into the kitchen.

Alex: "There's nothing you can do. Let it go."

Nick: "Oh, that's right, you would know all about letting go, wouldn't you?"

Alex only responded with a frown, to which his grip weakened. Nick slipped out of his grasp and retreated into the darkness of the hallway, before heading down the stairs and into the basement.

Alex backed up to stand against the counter, where he rested his hands in his lap as he leaned back a bit. He looked out through the kitchen window to see the burning tower in the distance, knowing what there was still to come; knowing that Nick hardly knew at all.

Viper

Chapter Summary

Viper enters the stage.

Viper

The bass was enough to make his stomach churn. He might have been used to it by then, if it ever got any easier. Instead, he let it carry him, like some sick heartbeat that tried to break free. Viper kicked himself into the air, entangling his body with the pole, to wind back down until he felt his skin upon the hard, cold concrete floor. When he tilted his head back and arched his back, to open his eyes and look upon them, he saw him there, the one he wanted; more than anything, but just for that night.

So he threw around his legs, his arms and his waist until he felt their eyes all over him. In his head, he sang along to the music, pretending to be anywhere but there, just long enough to forget what he was doing. He spun around again, moving to the floor after another flourish, this time feeling a hand under his chin. Now slipping back into reality, he looked into the man's eyes and grinned in the only way he knew, his eyes calling the CEO to the door backstage.

He would finish his routine until his shift was over. He knew that, in but a few moments, the cameras would go dark for just about long enough, so he paced over to the edge of the stage and sat down there, putting his foot to the man's chest when he tried to get up from his seat. Viper made eye contact, looking for that hunger he knew, only to trail his gaze down, to the man's hand in his pocket. Green in his hand, Viper risked a touch, but only for long enough to have him wanting for more.

Before he knew it, he was peeling a hand from his waist, taking it with his own, and guiding the one attached. There, the pounding of the bass faded out until it was just his beating heart, in tandem with the only other in the room. These booths were soundproof; he knew he had the time.

Dorian tried to get high on the man's touch, but he convinced himself, long ago, that it was impossible like this. Instead, he tried to drown in the man's eyes, like he did in glass after glass. It worked for a moment, when the businessman explored every uncovered corner of his body, only to start uncovering more.

Dorian humoured him for a while, allowing him to cross that line for but a few minutes. Carefully, he stepped over that ledge, falling into the darkness that lingered within. Moments

later, he found himself on his back; far enough.

He stopped the man in his tracks, placing his hand on the other's chest. Carefully he whispered a lie so sweet that it made the carnivore withdraw, just long enough for Dorian to nudge him back against the couch. Dorian then placed himself on the man's lap, his hands still on his chest. He applied the tiniest amount of pressure, when he started to raise his grasp to the base of the man's neck, kissing him the only way he knew.

Just as the resistance faded and the man started to melt away, Dorian tightened his grip on the other's neck and squeezed but lightly, listening as a moan escaped the predator's lips. Dorian tilted the man's head to the side to bare his flesh. He applied just that little bit more pressure, until the vein just barely popped from below the skin, then he held the man down without any force, plunging his lips upon the skin. For a moment, all he did was indulge the other, until he bit down but lightly.

The man barely even struggled when two razor sharp needles were plunged into his neck, ditching the most vicious of neurotoxins into his blood. Dorian backed away just slightly, watching as the man raised his hand to grasp someone, anyone, only to back away again. Dorian watched as the wolf's strength faded and the lights in his eyes seeped into the darkness.

"Go to sleep," Dorian whispered to him, before the man closed his eyes forever. The grin on Dorian's face faded with the man's life. He got up from the dead man's lap and lingered by the door for a moment, before leaving it all behind.

Just moments later, Dorian found himself outside in the softest of rains, where a figure stood, waiting in the alleyway behind Club Blacklight. Dorian hummed a greeting to him, to which the silhouette raised a hand in a gentle wave.

Dorian: "He should be dead by now. Seer, sir."

Seer: "Efficiently handled, as always. You may go; we shall clean up now."

Seer hummed a quiet order to his Peacekeepers, their previously darkened armour now lighting up with a sinister red. Dorian watched as they all went in through the backdoor, one by one. He swore he could hear the music stop from out there.

Dorian: "My payment?"

Seer: "Awaiting you at your apartment. I look forward to working with you again."

This man named Seer stood still as a statue's shadow, before suddenly taking a step into the light. Dorian could not help but wince at the appearance of the Seer's unnerving helmet, which possessed almost no armour at all, consisting almost entirely of a screen that showed a red eye, moving around presumably with the man's own gaze underneath.

Dorian: "Sir, I- I want to stop doing this."

Seer: "Done with the bloodied palms?"

Dorian: "More like done with all this cloak and dagger. This was my last assignment, I think."

"Oh but Dorian," the Seer's deep voice rumbled from behind the mask as he stepped forward again and rested a hand on Dorian's shoulder. It took everything Dorian had not to flinch.

Seer: "Why don't we discuss that over a drink sometime?"

Dorian: "O-okay sir."

Seer: "That's a good pup. Again, stay safe."

With that, Seer headed into the building as well, leaving Dorian alone out there; alone with the rain and the arrival of a news reporter. Dorian was quick to leave the scene, after that, making it home unscathed soon after.

Once he had made it back into his apartment, he ignored the credit card on his doormat for the time being, instead opting to head into his bedroom right away. He lingered by the window for just a moment, glancing out at the rainy streets, before moving along to his wardrobe. There, he changed his t-shirt and shorts for sweatpants and a hoodie, before burying himself under the sheets of his bed.

He would have sworn that he could see that glaring, red eye in his dreams.

An Eye for an Eye

Chapter Summary

Raven meets the Overseer.

They assured themselves that it was not any different. It would simply be them and this mystery buyer; like it always was. Why did this one scare them so much? Well, it was not like this mystery buyer was a Militia overlord. No, this guy was different. For one, different name; Raven was here to meet someone who called himself 'Overseer'.

The street-worn youngster was nearly lost in thought when they heard footsteps coming from the other end of the hallway. The dampened beating of boots upon eroding concrete was dead giveaway in those echoing ruins. One skyscraper that was never finished, just like so many other things in Coredam.

Raven: "Overseer?"

Seer: "Don't strain yourself. Seer is fine."

The snappiness of his new guest pulled Raven back to reality, as they rose from the ridged window frame and faced the source of the other voice. Raven was faced with a man who hid his features in shadows, though they could just barely make out a red blinking light.

Raven: "Didn't suppose I would be needing a torch. Really hoping that thing on your collar is not a beacon. If it is, we might just have to call it quits here."

Seer: "It's a beacon, but it is being jammed. You can check the signal yourself, can't you?"

Raven was hesitant to pull out their own beacon, one with a display hooked up to it via cable. To their own surprise, the stranger spoke the truth. Neither the guest's signal - nor his own - was visible on the monitor. Raven was going to say that it did not prove anything, but it did; they trusted their own tech.

Raven: "You planted it beforehand."

Raven knew his tech; signal jammers like that one took a lot of energy. For something to let out no signal at all, it had to be hooked up to its own generator. To Raven's puzzlement, the man ahead simply tapped his hip, where, suspended from a utility belt, sat a tiny black box.

Seer: "I would suggest you check, but we don't have time."

Raven: "Twenty minutes."

Seer: "No more."

Raven: "No less."

The two exchanged another series of glances, before Raven rested their shoulders a little.

Raven: "So what did you bring?"

Seer: "The tools I promised."

The man slid a sturdy backpack off his shoulders and let it thud onto the ground, before taking a step back and opening the zipper while knelt down, comfortably looking away. Instinctively, Raven fiddled with the knife in their pocket. The Overseer pulled a wallet out of the backpack, while Raven wondered what else was in there. Seer cleared his intensions, before throwing the wallet into Raven's hands.

The younger one inspected the outside, noticing that it was real leather.

Raven: "What are you, ForeverTech?"

Raven prodded as they undid the button and opened the zipper. Inside, they found a rather small flash drive and a credit card.

Raven: "What am I looking at?"

Seer: "The plans, as promised, and a gift from me."

Raven: "It'd better not be spiked."

Seer: "I am not that subtle."

Somehow, Raven believed him on his edged words. The younger one took a moment to catch their breath, before following procedure, their words quick and ears sharp.

Raven: "How much?"

Seer: "Fifty thousand."

Raven: "Tag?"

Seer: "Kyanite."

Raven: "Security?"

Seer: "Six-zero-eight-zero-nine."

Raven: "Name?"

Seer: "Aurelius."

The two exchanged one final pair of warning glances, before Raven closed the wallet and pocketed it, making a mental note of the information just uttered.

Seer: "You did not come emptyhanded, I hope?"

Raven was almost about to sneer back, but reminded themselves to at least appear professional, so they quickly whipped out a flash drive of their own, one marked with the title 'OS'. They took three steps towards the stranger, before kneeling down and carefully placing the flash drive on the cold tiles. Once Raven had confirmed that the stranger remained where he had been, they retreated to their own little corner.

Suddenly, the stranger paced forward and took the flash drive from the ground, quietly rubbing the hastily written tag off of the side, before pocketing his end of the spoils.

Seer: "Good then. You have earned this."

The man's voice boomed ominously as he nudged forth the backpack, before retreating as well. Raven took their final turn and carefully weighed the pack in their hand, before slinging it over their shoulder and taking it back to their turf.

Seer: "I hope that you will continue your business with my organisation. We have need of your data, your quick feet... You would be well compensated."

Raven scoffed.

Raven: "With no respect owed, 'Seer', we do not enter pacts with those that hide their faces from us. To look through the Eye, is to enter its gaze."

Seer: "Aval's Gaze, so I was told."

Raven: "Then show your face. Tell me who you are and we can talk about this 'deal'."

Seer: "Raven, by now you've got to understand that I am not one to follow protocol."

That much was true, Raven could admit. This 'Seer' character had been very thorough in keeping these transactions off paper, or electronics, for that matter.

Raven: "Then how do we know that you will not sell us out the moment that you get a grip?"

Seer: "Oh, but I can just tell you that. I am not afraid to be seen."

Raven: "You hurt my head, old man. Will you step into the light or not?"

An electronic hiccup escaped the man as he seemed to snicker... or chuckle, it was hard to tell. Raven slinked away further as Seer stepped forward again, this time stepping beyond the virtual border between them and into the glow of a streetlight.

Darkened armour to sink into the night. A holstered pistol upon his side, to send beyond the divide. A crimson crest, an eye over a quiet valley, upon his chest. Then a helmet, with a visor wide; a window into a starless night sky. Within it, there sat but one star, another eye, red as the blood in Raven's racing heart.

Frozen for but a moment, Raven collected themselves before squinting their eyes from beyond their own darkened veil.

Raven: "Peacekeeper."

Seer: "Collective Agent Raven."

A growl rolled off Raven's tongue.

Seer: "Careful now, agent. You didn't really think that you are the only ones with an Eye, did you? Aval wasn't the only one condemned to the abyss, after all."

Raven: "You are making an enemy that you can't beat, drone."

Seer: "Like the Militia?"

Seer took another step closer, backing the younger one into a corner, where he towered over them.

Raven: "If you hurt me, you will never know where it is."

Seer: "I am not here to hurt you. Just to make sure that you give me what I paid for."

Raven felt smaller than they ever had, as if they were an ant in the embrace of a mantis. The Overseer held the flash drive up to his chest, listening to the faintly buzzing circuits, before crushing the entire thing in his palm. Raven snarled.

Raven: "Talon."

Seer: "Hm?"

Raven: "Talon of the Virkor Agency."

Seer: "See? That was not so hard, pup."

The Overseer attempted to pat Raven on the head, but they were quick to duck away, escaping from the tiniest hell on earth. Seer chuckled, disgustingly delighted.

Seer: "Go now. Return to your other birds. Return to them and tell them off my offer. I trust that, now, they will be willing to hear it."

A final mechanical whine left the Peacekeeper's armour, before he effortlessly vaulted over a two-metre fence. Raven, frozen still like a startled cat, listened to the sound of distant footsteps, clutching the pack upon their back, which remained with them.

After another second, they turned tail and sprinted down the alleyway, before dropping down a basement hatch and into the tunnels below.

The Nightingale

Chapter Summary

Talon hears of a new plot

Talon

Raven: "You know how it is, Eric. He left me no choice."

Talon: "I know. Send me the data, I will take it from here."

Raven: "Thanks, Tal. The Collective owes you for this."

The screen went dark then, showing only a reflection of the bags beneath Talon's eyes. It had been a long week and an even longer night. Even so, it seemed that his bed was still a while away. The metal table in his concrete office rattled a scraping hiss, as the tall one stepped away from his desk, closing the laptop behind his back with a soft thud.

A million lights beyond the window behind his desk. A million lights beyond the shadows of his bastion. Car horn after siren, a gunshot, then the silence. The silence, then the roaring of engines and the distant whirring of a helicopter. A crimson crest, a bleeding eye above a quiet valley, upon the tail of a soulless dragonfly. The beating heart, deep within an abyss.

Talon: "Aval's Tears."

Aquarius: "Sir?"

Talon: "The eye, the blood... Aval's Tears."

Aquarius: "A fable. Nothing more."

Talon: "Nothing less. We would do well not to underestimate the ones who invoke an ancient god."

Aquarius: "Superstition is expensive, Talon."

Talon: "It's not just superstition, you know this."

Aquarius: "That thing is only as powerful as we believe it is."

Talon: "I am not worried about our beliefs."

Aquarius: "Fuck me, you're not saying-"

Talon: "The Overseer. He's back in town."

Aquarius: "It's been months since the shooting, Talon. Are we sure they're not-"

Talon: "Ghost stories?"

The office was toxic with insinuation. The two exchanged a look, then another.

Aquarius: "Rumours, Tal. Nothing more."

Talon: "Raven has seen him."

Aquarius: "And lived to tell about it? The PKF top dog would have shredded a rat like them."

Talon: "The Overseer wanted something."

Aquarius: "Only one thing worth buying from the Collective. Well- Two things."

Aquarius' slender fingers sharply trailed over the back of his phone, scratching off the logo, bit by bit.

Talon: "And Raven sold it to him."

Aquarius: "Fucking rat."

Talon: "Business, Aquarius. Besides, the Overseer had their address."

Aquarius: "The Militia wouldn't have budged."

Talon: "The Militia have an army."

Aquarius: "So do we. Why not use it?"

Talon: "To kill the Overseer?"

Aquarius: "The Collective. We destroy their Eye, we blind the Overseer."

Talon briefly considered it, finally turning now to face the pale Aquarius. Eyes sharp as the Northstar itself, a brittle and tall body, but a strong will. Draped over a sofa by the eastern wall, he challenged his superior, but Talon would not budge.

Talon: "We still have friends in the Collective."

Aquarius: "So what do you suggest?"

Talon: "A more surgical approach. We will declaw the lion, before challenging his den. Send for a scalpel."

Aquarius: "The independent one or our lass?"

Talon: "Independent. If we can help it, we want to ghost."

Aquarius: "Yes, sirrrrrr-"

Aquarius slurred as he got up from his comfortable lounging. He stretched his arms above his head, before turning to face Talon a final time.

Aquarius: "And Leo?"

Talon: "Leo can handle himself. We will extract him if necessary."

Aquarius: "Understood, *Nightingale*."

With that, the operative left the room, leaving behind a void denser than before. Contemplative, Talon paced over to the display cases in the office's center, placing his calloused hand upon the glass as he whispered to himself.

Virkor, do you look upon us now and scowl, or would you have slain the Eye?

No answer would come. None from above and none from below. Talon lowered his hand again, to instead rub his temples, a headache ravaging his skull as he turned to the window once more.

He looked out over the city from his spire, wondering if either would ever fall. Much time to wonder, however, he would not have; for the sky suddenly lit up with a cloud born from red powder.

Sirens wailed, before a horn bellowed.

A horn bellowed and it spoke: *Peace*.

Contender

Chapter Summary

Not all bark.

A flare of a thousand flames touched the sky, a torrent of smoke soon to follow. Something earthly thundered across concrete and brick, to shatter windows and eardrums. The fire roared against the dark and buckled as a truck roved through, one armoured and fast.

It would come to a grinding halt, tires shrieking on the asphalt as they pulled into the torched parking lot. Five figures darted out from all doors, fanning out around the vehicle with tightly gripped rifles. The five came to a halt for a moment as the shattering wail of a PKF siren bellowed on the wind. A few words:

Sabel: "In and out. Five minutes and we're gone, with or without it."

Then dead silence as they allowed the rumbling flames to cover their steps and the tracks they left behind. The truck turned about, as the five stepped through a doorway with shattered hinges.

Sabel stepped over the now-scraped metal, planting her foot firmly between the dusted rubble. She quickly tapped a button on the side of her helmet, turning on the flashlight mounted just above her right ear and forging a tunnel of light through the thickening smoke. She made sure to adjust her gas mask and had the others do the same, before venturing deeper into the complex, speeding up when she found the first bodies.

No sign of the guards as the five approached a staircase. Two were left behind when the rest descended into the bowels of the factory. The smell of lead was thick in the air as they established a perimeter. One would lock down the stairs, taking their spot beneath. Another took point against the unknown, as Sabel quickly rushed around the room, looking for their payload.

When she found nothing, Sabel signed for the tip of the spear to move ahead, to which her wingman started to expand their line into the dark. Sabel was quick to check another room, and another, before finally laying eyes upon the storage room she had been looking for.

Gauge: "Two minutes!"

Sabel knelt beside a safe and tinkered with the mechanism, before sounding an agitated sigh and grunting.

Sabel: "Fuck! They changed the code."

Gauge: "Plan B then! Tare, be ready!"

Tare: "Clearing a path!"

Tare's shout sounded from the stairs as he started to bound his way back up. Sabel grabbed the clamps from her backpack and tightly mounted them upon the safe, making sure to wind the ropes around either side, before engaging the lift. A mechanical screech left her backpack as the mechanism engaged and her exoskeleton clasped the force.

She let out a guttural groan as she hoisted herself back onto her feet, finding her footing before jogging back towards the stairs, closely trailed by Gauge who held her back as they ascended again.

Once upstairs, they reunited with their rear guard, before rushing outside. The driver opened the backdoors from within, allowing Sabel to drop the safe inside, backpack included.

Gauge: "Ten seconds! Get the fuck out!"

Sabel quickly climbed into the truck and slammed the doors shut behind Gauge.

Sabel: "Fucking drive!"

Tare: "Wait for Veil!"

Their fifth and fourth quickly got into the sides, but the last took a bullet with him. The deafening bang of an anti-material rifle shattered the air, as a high calibre sniper round mauled the door and Veil's chest. A headless torso with a hole the size of a football slumped over in the doorway.

Sabel: "HEADS DOWN!"

The remaining four dove away beneath the windows. Not that it would matter if that thing fired again. The driver was quick to dispose of the corpse in their car, kicking it out of the doorway and slamming the door shut just as another round razed across the windshield, nailing the driver. As his blood coated the car's front, the Banshee's Wail could be heard again, this time way too close.

Sabel: "Fuck! It's too late, jolt you morons!"

She shouted as she kicked her own door open and hit the ground outside, just in time to dodge another shot that pulverised Tare's shoulder, sending him to the concrete to bleed to a screaming death. Sabel sputtered a cough at the street before pushing herself onto her feet, glancing over to yell at Gauge, who was hastily trying to get the safe onto his back.

Sabel: "Leave it! We're done here!"

Gauge quickly nodded and joined her as they jolted it into an adjacent alleyway. The Banshee's Wail pursued them, this time sounding twice in quick succession.

Gauge: "We have to split up!"

Sabel: "Haul ass back to base, I'll take mark and meet you there!"

With that, at the next intersection, Gauge took a left and Sabel kept running straight ahead. She yanked the rifle from her back and took the safety off, before readying her weapon as she rushed out of the alleyway and into the open air, where she spotted the first set of LEDs she could find, readied, aimed, and took a pot shot.

A puff of smoke left her muzzle as the bullet razed through the air, before planting itself right between the stalker's chest plates. Another Wail, this time directed at her. The sound nearly destroyed her ears as she quickly turned tail and ran in the opposite direction.

She swore that she could hear approaching soles above her, as she retreated into another alleyway, seeing a blinking blue light just ahead, mounted low upon a wall. She looked away for a moment, turning her gaze to the ground as she approached the next intersection. Suddenly, she came to a grinding halt when she saw a shadow passing overhead.

A pair of boots hit the ground before her and she was faced with a pair of red, glowing eyes. She scoffed for a moment at her would-be assailant, before quickly drawing her rifle, but the peacekeeper was too quick to close the distance and punched it to the side, before grappling her arms.

The mechanical joints of her exoskeleton engaged immediately and caught the blow, allowing her to take the upper hand again as she shoved him away, this time reaching for a knife on her belt. When she looked up again, blade in hand, she immediately weaved to the side as the peacekeeper brought down a blade of its own.

The honed metal sword seemed to buzz in the wind as it was brought about again. Sabel attempted to catch it with her own, but it was too fast, feinting and redirecting the blow to her leg. To her fortune, her exoskeleton caught most of the blow, leaving slight nick in the metal and a similar wound in her flesh.

She howled in pain, heaving as she fell to her knees. The peacekeeper quickly found a pair of handcuffs on its belt, weaving around her to apprehend her right away, but Sabel completed her ruse and got off her knees, darting away from the stalker as the metal frame on her back caught another swipe of its blade. The steps behind her picked up the pace as she dropped to the ground once more, ducking her head to dodge a tackle as she passed her wrist over the blue LED.

The lock buzzed, the mechanism clicked, and the metal doors slid open. She tucked and rolled into the hole, dropping down into the basement and catching the fall with her exoskeleton, saving herself from a broken back. She looked up to see the doors close behind her, followed by the rapid kicks of the peacekeeper, trying to beat its way into the tunnel.

She chuckled for but a second, before her smirk faded the moment that the metal actually dented. She scrambled onto her feet and retreated into the warrens, making sure to take the large way around for good measure.

Poison

Chapter Summary

Looking for a weapon

Raven: "Talon asked?"

Dean: "Yeah. Something something scalpel, lion's den, whatever. He wants someone dead."

Raven: "He's got people for that."

Dean: "Wants someone independent."

Raven: "He wants to ghost."

Raven sighed, kicking their feet back onto a side table as they tried to overrule the bass that pounded their stomach. They traced their eyes along the cables on the walls, imagining them to be the highways up above.

Raven: "Who even does he want to nail?"

Dean: "Some corporate big shot, somewhere in business district, you know how it is. Big old weapons manufacturer. Talon thinks the poor sod is supplying the PKF."

Raven: "Well, he is. Don't suppose he would like to take a more subtle approach?"

Dean: "It's the Agency, Ray. One person at a time is about as subtle as they get."

Raven: "I can see why he wants an outsider to pull the trigger."

The young one got up from their seat and looked back at Dean, a woman who was built like a wardrobe. They walked over to an office cabinet up against the side of the room.

Raven: "He is willing to pay for this, right?"

Dean: "Said you owe him."

Raven: "Shit. A life for a life, I guess."

Raven drew a burner phone from the cabinet, turning it on and taking it through the factory installations as Dean got up from her seat as well and joined them by the wall.

Dean: "We even got someone who hates themselves enough to take the job?"

Raven: "No. But we got someone who hates corps just about enough."

Dean: "You're not talking about the Grey kid, are you?"

Raven: "You'd object?"

Dean: "Boy's all green. Can't we get someone more seasoned?"

Raven: "Nick Grey is the only one who hasn't grown a brain yet, which is why he will take this job."

Dean: "But his brother would- I mean-"

Raven: "Hm? Oh, right, Alex? Yeah that was his name. Forgot about him."

Dean: "Alex works for ForeverTech. Even if Nick can pull this off, they could- FT would-"

Raven: "I don't care what ForeverTech does. We will remain one step ahead of them, Nick can have his revenge and Talon will have his blood. Simple as that."

Dean: "What if they retaliate?"

Raven: "We will be undetectable."

Dean: "Nick won't."

Raven pocketed the phone and slammed the cabinet door shut.

Raven: "Why do you care so much about Grey?"

Dean scowled briefly, before composing herself and taking a step back.

Dean: "Why do you care so little?"

The two exchanged some looks, before Raven turned about and started to pace towards the stairwell.

Raven: "We have plenty of people here to worry about. Jackdaw gets arrested, we'll bail her out. Crow gets stuck at the docks, we'll extract him. These are small problems. Small problems that could get big for us if we start worrying about outsiders. He is independent, not Collective."

Dean: "You know that he wants to join us, Ray. Why do you keep pushing him away?"

Raven: "You said so yourself. His brother works for FT."

Dean: "I thought you didn't care about FT."

Raven: "I don't. I just don't want someone who does to come knocking."

Dean: "You think his brother would come find him?"

Raven: "Bullshit. Alex couldn't give less about us."

Dean: "Then who are you so afraid of?"

Raven marched up the stairs, phone still in hand as they linked it to the nightclub's wi-fi network, using it to download an APK, before promptly scrubbing the connection from the device again.

Dean was quick to follow, pulling the other to a halt as they entered the main floor, where they stood in a corner, away from the ravers over on the dance floor.

Raven could barely hear her as she spoke, merely nodding towards the stage, where a serpent-tongued dancer had claimed a pole.

Dean: "You think he'll come back?"

Raven: "He won't if we don't give him a reason. Having this done quietly, by an independent, will help keep the target off our backs."

Dean: "Didn't think Viper had it in him."

Raven: "Yeah, well, he picked his venom."

Dean: "Any ideas on how to deal with him?"

Raven: "We could ask Tal."

Dean: "So why didn't you?"

Raven sighed again, straightening his back as he leaned against a wall, eyes trailing along the crowd.

Raven: "The Overseer likes him. Wouldn't want to touch anything more valuable than my own head."

Dean: "Fair enough. But still, what are we doing about it?"

Raven: "I don't know yet. I guess I was hoping that the Militia would have dented them by now."

Dean: "Was there ever any hope?"

Raven: "Maybe not, but one thing's for sure. We either need a whole lot more firepower or some venom of our own."

Dean: "You still want to fight back?"

Raven: "While that card remains on the table, we have a shot at it. That's really all we can take. I want you to go find Nick. Tell him about the job. Tell him we'll pay."

Dean: "What if he declines?"

Raven: "Then we'll remind him of the things he lost."

Raven slipped away into the ground, quickly fading into the silhouettes under blinking, violent lights, leaving Dean behind to look at the dancer.

Dean: "Fuck, Viper. You're in over your head."

Hex

Chapter Summary

Cursed beyond imagining.

The house was empty that evening. Thomas was working late and Nick had run off in search of a drink. It was Alex, sitting in his study as he worked through the administration he had taken home. Between the endless papers and the long nights, he grasped his gaze as he sighed, leaning his brow into the palm of his hand.

For a moment, he imagined the time he'd seen his father sitting there, just like he was sitting there now. He remembered how tired he looked. He remembered how he would sneak downstairs at night to grab something to eat, only to find his father there eating stone cold "dinner".

He lifted his head to look into a mirror that stood ahead of him, aimed as if to take a picture of the room. A mirror that would never be empty, he feared.

Then he lifted his head even more to the sound of the doorbell. Quickly, he paced out of the study and locked the door behind himself, before heading into the hallway, where he opened the drawer of a side table, hand resting on a cold steel grip.

When he opened the door, the anxious expression on his face was lifted, his brow unfrowned and his eyes lighter.

Alex: "Hey... Are you okay? Are you crying?"

Dorian: "Hey Al... Sorry to come knocking, I just... Didn't want to go home."

Alex: "It's okay, just... Here."

Alex opened the door all the way now and stepped forward, pulling Dorian into a hug and placing his hand upon the other's head, as if to ward off the bad memories.

Alex: "You're so cold. When did you last eat?"

Alex gently pulled Dorian inside through the doorway and closed the door behind him.

Alex: "Actually, don't answer that. Go on, get to the couch and I'll get you something to chew on."

The blue-eyed one started to head to the kitchen, followed closely by Dorian, to his concern.

Alex: "Don't want to be alone? That's okay. Stay close."

A few moments later, Alex slid Dorian a glass of hot chocolate. Dorian, sitting on the counter, took the glass and carefully started to drink the chocolate, not bothering to wait for it to cool down.

Alex turned back to face the stove, where he was heating up some leftovers from the night before. He sighed quietly, before picking his words carefully.

Alex: "Do you want to talk about it?"

Dorian: "No... Yes, I- No..."

Alex: "Want to do the questions thing?"

Dorian: "Yes..."

Alex: "Are you injured?"

Dorian: "No..."

Alex: "Was it at the club?"

Dorian: "Yeah..."

Alex: "Did you agree to it?"

Dorian: "No- yes- It's complicated."

Alex: "Did he touch you?"

Dorian: "Yes..."

Alex: "You were paid?"

Dorian remained quiet as he pulled out a credit card, placing it on the counter. Alex noticed the red eye, turning his gaze away again when he saw Dorian getting up.

Alex: "That Overseer character, again?"

Dorian remained silent, instead standing behind Alex and hugging him, shaking softly.

Alex took a deep breath before turning around and looking the other in the eyes, both hands gently placed on his cheeks as he lifted up his head.

Alex: "Open up..."

Dorian hesitantly opened his mouth, allowing Alex to see the blood behind his teeth. Alex shivered faintly at the sight, before carefully reaching out. He firmly placed one index finger on Dorian's left canine and another on his right, before quickly yanking off the metal frame that kept the tiny syringes in place.

Alex grabbed a glass and filled it with water, before submerging the fangs and leaving them to sit on the counter.

Dorian: "He went all cold and... His eyes, Alex..."

Alex: "Don't think about that right now. Think about this, this room. Think about this."

Alex handed Dorian his hot chocolate again, this time half-full.

Dorian: "He said I'm not done yet. He said he wants to talk. I don't want to talk, Alex..."

Tears started to form in Dorian's eyes as his hands trembled. His breathing hitched as he tried to hold it, though unsuccessfully. At first it came out as a sniff, then a snicker, but then he broke down on the kitchen floor.

Alex immediately sat down next to him and pulled him into another hug, gently rubbing Dorian's back between his shoulders as he held his breath.

Alex: "Don't worry, he can't find you here. He'll never find you here."

Alex tried to comfort the other, holding him as close as he could.

Dorian: "I'm stuck. I can't get out and I don't want to go back. It's like he's got a hex on me."

Alex: "What if we go to face him together? I'm sure maybe we can have him sign you out formally or something."

Dorian: "No! No, I- Alex, he doesn't know you."

Alex: "I have friends at ForeverTech, surely we can come to some kind of understanding."

Dorian: "Alex! He doesn't know you. He can't know you. I don't want him to talk to you too. He'll talk to you and he'll never stop."

Alex: "Dorian..."

Dorian: "No! No, we won't. I need to do this on my own."

Alex: "Then at least let me help you. Let me drive you there, so I can take you home."

Dorian: "I- Okay."

Alex: "Here."

Alex dried the other's tears, looking into his reddened eyes. He lingered for a moment, whispering.

Alex: "It's late. You can take my bed for the night."

Dorian: "Al, can we- Please..."

Alex sighed and weighed the implication carefully before answering.

Alex: "Fine. Just for tonight. Wouldn't want to put a hex on you."

Dorian: "You'd never."

Overseer

Chapter Summary

The bleeding eye above an empty valley.

~5 months ago~

Overseer

Back at Northstar, I was visited at night by the claws of a dream. I remember how the snow shimmered bright silver in the moonlight. How I'd awaken to snow on my face, ice in my bones.

I remember how I'd sit up and hold up my hand against the stars. I remember something looking back at me, somewhere out there.

They call it Aval, that thing up there. They call it Aval and Aval weeps. When Aval weeps, the sky lights up with a rain of stars, dashing from north to south.

A local guide told me once that, when the sky lights up like that, this Aval is mourning the loss of someone named Ephes.

A story of grief. I have yet to hear someone tell it from start to finish. As with many old tales, accounts of the events seem scattered at best and straight up unreliable at worst.

I guess that's what I get for being so late to all this.

Supposedly, once upon a time, Aval's Tears could be seen all over Statera. Nowadays, it is reserved only for the far northern coast. But I didn't come here for a lightshow.

I was planning our next expedition when my lieutenant came to find me. His armour was wet with molten snow, but I remember the relief in his voice.

Lieutenant Iris: "Commander. We struck an opening in the western range. The guides are saying we found it."

I had never put my armour on so quickly in my life. The thought of finally getting out of the cold rallied my stalkers and myself.

We drove through a snowstorm that day, just to be there by sundown, knowing that it would remain dark for a very long time.

We ignited our flashlights when we arrived at the mine, where I sent some of my people ahead to clear a path through the snow, to make sure that we had not unearthed some kind of curse.

Truth be told, I am not so sure if I even believe in such a thing. Either way, it never hurts to consider the will of the dead.

When my scouts came back with their heads still on their shoulders, I led the rest of my company inside through the maw of the storm.

What we found down there, it was something that even the fables couldn't have prepared us for. There were walls of ice, towering above us like the skyscrapers back home.

Within the ice, lifeless yet living, were suspended rows upon rows of dead. Their blue piercing eyes, cold as the frozen lakes, would follow us through the corridor.

I remember how their pale skin glistened with the light of millions of stars. I remember how I could hear their voices.

The air was thick and unyielding, but we trudged on. With one grave disturbed, what was one more?

Iris: "What is this place called again?"

Overseer: "The Crypt."

Iris: "Apt."

Overseer: "It covers the matter at hand."

Iris: "Are they really still..."

Overseer: "Alive? I feel like we will be finding out soon enough."

I had two of our people cover the rear, while the rest of us descended further into the frozen halls. As we got lower and lower, a silence started to rule. Then I heard it.

A song.

A whistle, almost like a howl. With every tone, the wind would rush between the cracks in the ice, sounding the cave like a horn.

In the depths, we saw it.

A tomb, built for a demigod.

It was hewn into a pale, glowing ice, in the heart of the mountain. Up top sat a crest, one I recognised.

Overseer: "The Northstar. Iris, you're with me. The rest of you, hold the line until we return."

I waited not for any answer, before descending one final time.

Trailed closely by my lieutenant, I was greeted by something even more otherworldly. Here, the ice held not corpses, but constellations of stars. An entire night sky, trapped in the cold.

At the end, another wall of ice, adorned with a single burning star, bigger than all the others. Beneath it, a silhouette, deep within the heart.

Iris: "Overseer, I know that we planned this but- Are you certain?"

Overseer: "This is it, Iris. Five months. Five months and we're here. The mountain can have its Northstar. I just need the necklace."

Iris: "I will hold your back."

I remember this reverberance in the ice, almost as if my steps echoed a thousand times over. In the dark, it came to me.

It whispered.

It whispered so sharply.

I thought I was bleeding.

I thought I was bleeding from every wound I'd ever had, then my hand felt cold.

When I looked down, I was holding it, jewellery of the finest silver I'd ever seen. And within it, a single blue gemstone, with a bright light within.

If I knew any prayers, I might have whispered one. Yet, all I could say was...

Overseer: "May the Northstar guide us home."

Scalpel

Chapter Summary

The independent.

Nick paced back and forth in the alleyway, anxiety spread across his mind and face as he considered the thought of meeting a Collective operative. His breath hitched with every drop of rain, every rat's skitter and every cat's hiss.

He forced himself to straighten his back, to feign stalwartness. He could not buckle in the face of anticipation if he were to take this job, after all. His mind raced at the question of what he could be signing up for.

Was it another run? Infiltration, maybe? Was he delivering another letter, like that time with the Militia? The Militia; recalling them made his skin crawl. That might have been the only job he'd turn down, he thought; another run for the Militia.

He would have no time to consider the alternatives, though, as he could hear the faint tapping of footsteps in the dark beyond the streetlight. This was where he was told to wait; the light by the warren entrance.

He was surprised to see not the slender, cunning shape of a Collective runner, but instead something that looked like the silhouette of an enforcer. When she stepped into the light, Nick felt like an ant in her presence, instinctively taking a step back.

Dean: "You would be Nick Grey?"

Nick: "Er- Yeah. You are... Collective?"

Dean: "I am. I have your assignment."

The towering woman pulled out a flash drive. Nick had come prepared, quickly plugging it into the side of a laptop he already had set up on a nearby brick wall. When he opened the drive, he was greeted by a set of GPS coordinates and a PDF.

He quickly opened the document to read the parameters, startled to find 'seek and destroy' as his objective.

Nick: "Seek and destroy?"

Dean: "That a problem?"

Nick: "Shouldn't be, but... I don't see what you need destroyed."

Dean: "We included a picture."

Nick focused his eyes on the screen again, worried to find only one image; the portrait of a man that apparently went by the name of Vick Accada.

Nick: "I don't think I understand."

Dean then lifted a large bag from her shoulder and placed it on the ground before Nick. Nick shot her a confirming look before opening the bag and revealing what tools he was supposed to work with.

Now even more concerned, he found it to be only one. He found a barrel, then a trigger, then a stock, a magazine, a tripod, a small box with a blue stripe on it and finally... A scope.

Nick: "I don't know how to use this."

Dean: "You won't need to, courtesy of our friends. All you have to do is place it on the tripod and pull trigger when it lets you."

Nick: "No, I- I have never shot someone before."

Dean: "Do you want to help the Collective or not?"

Nick: "Yes! Yes, of course, but... Does he have to die?"

Dean: "You won't be shooting any innocents. That is Vick Accada, CEO of ForeverTech. Tonight, he will be at the described coordinates. You will be on an adjacent rooftop. When his path crosses your sight, you shoot him."

Nick: "ForeverTech? But I'll never live that down!"

Dean: "No one would. Not even Raven, which is why we need you to do it."

Nick: "And if I refuse?"

Dean: "Then this man walks free, so he may work another division to death."

Nick scowled at the thought, then at Dean.

Nick: "That's not fair."

Dean: "It isn't? And letting him walk is?"

Nick: "Killing him is not the same."

Dean: "No. Letting him walk is murder. Killing him is a mercy."

Nick: "I just don't want someone to die because of me."

Dean: "If you refuse, people will die because of you."

Nick shifted on his feet as he could feel a cold sweat forming on his forehead. His face was heating up as he thought of the man, this Vick, dead on the pavement somewhere. His blood boiled when he thought of his father. When he thought of his brother.

Dean: "So? What will it be, pup?"

Nick: "I'll do it."

Dean: "Syrella's Square. One hour before midnight, the parking garage. No one will stop you. Use the Warrens and you will see your brothers again."

Dean started to walk away, when Nick called out immediately.

Nick: "Wait! How do I find you?"

Dean: "You won't. We'll come to you. Have the gun with you when we do."

With that, Dean opened the hatch to the Warrens and slipped through, shutting it again behind her, leaving Nick with a flash drive and a very large rifle.

He unplugged the drive and looked at it for a moment, a part of him wishing that he would just chuck it into the sewers, throw the rifle down into the Warrens and walk away.

But, as Dean said, they would find him.

He was just wondering if the PKF would be first.

The Eye

Chapter Summary

Breaking free.

It was a towering structure just outside the city. The Eye, they called it. It was just as imposing as the PKF itself, a colossal complex of equal social implications.

Dorian: "They say that orphans go in and stalkers come out."

Alex: "I don't know if that's true."

Alex raced up the road that wound up onto the hill, looking out over Coredam. With every weave, the atmosphere grew tenser.

Dorian: "I'll wait for you in the lobby."

Alex: "No. Stay outside, I'll only be a few minutes."

Alex sounded an inaudible sigh through his helmet, before pulling into the parking lot, which was largely overshadowed by a concrete overhang of the many floors above.

Violent white light shone down oppressively from above, almost as if the ceiling itself was watching you. Alex could sense Dorian's anxiety even with a helmet covering his face.

Alex: "Take a second. The Overseer can wait another minute."

Dorian: "Right..."

Dorian's breathing hitched as he tried to force himself to calm down. Just a week ago he had found himself wishing that he would never return there. He still wished the same, but now he had a good reason to disregard it.

Alex: "I will be right out here. If he gives you shit, have someone fetch me."

Dorian nodded, half of his mind elsewhere as he took his helmet off and handed it to Alex, who attached it to a clip on the side of the motorcycle's frame. Anxiously, Alex watched him head inside, into the maw of the lion's den.

The inside was sleek and efficient. There had been left no room for decoration, other than the commemorations of different stalkers, both fallen and otherwise. There was the occasional potted plant here and there, but not enough to cause the illusion of a home.

Dorian kept his eyes on the floor as he approached the reception, where the most normal-looking Peacekeeper ever forged was seated. He wore a pair of glasses that bore a camera, with immediately lit up with a tiny red LED, the moment that Dorian made himself known.

The receptionist looked up from his paperwork, an inquisitive glare burnt upon his face.

Receptionist: "Are you here on an appointment."

Dorian: "I- No, not really. The Overseer wanted to talk to me, though, and I thought better now than later."

Receptionist: "Name?"

Dorian: "Dorian. Dorian Accada, but I might be in the system as 'Viper'."

The receptionist looked up from his screen again, eyes now less inquisitive and with more clarity.

Receptionist: "I have planned you for an immediate meeting. He should be in his office soon. Take the elevator to the twelfth floor. Wait in the lounge until you are called."

Dorian nodded nervously before pacing towards an elevator, two of which could be found adjacent to the reception.

Twelfth floor, top floor, he noticed. He found himself shutting the doors first, before pressing the twelfth button. He cursed under his breath when the sudden jerk of the elevator made him jump.

To his horror, the elevator stopped just a few floors short of twelve. He tried to control his breathing as the doors opened and a pair of Peacekeepers stepped in.

He held his tongue when he was faced with their blackened armour, indistinguishable, oppressive. He knew that they were not even looking at him, but he could feel their piercing gaze all the same.

The Banshee's Wail, it sounded behind his eyes, ringing within his ears as he thought of the red eye. He tried to drown it out, but it was everywhere, even within his soul. He could feel tears forming in his eyes when the door opened up, twelfth floor.

He quickly stepped out, perhaps a bit quicker than he should have. He could feel their eyes following him, even when the door was already closed.

Finally, he dared to look around again, at the surprisingly lavish decorum of the lounge. It seemed an oasis in this desert of a building.

The air seemed lighter here, as Dorian could almost imagine government representatives and corporate executives simply kicking back on these sofas.

He tried to imagine being one; unbothered, wealthy, borderline immortal... He imagined having it all. He imagined having nothing to fear. He imagined having nothing to hide. He imagined it not being so easy to imagine.

Dorian glanced over at the door to the Overseer's office, the crimson glare upon it, bleeding the same red. Even he felt its hurt and he wasn't even being hunted, or so he allowed himself to believe. Maybe he would not get to believe for long.

Dorian 'Viper' Accada

A metallic voice rang out from a speaker overhead.

Enter the auditorium.

Shaken out of his trance, Dorian climbed back upon his feet, the knot in his stomach now rising into his throat. One step after the other, he walked towards the eye. He hated the way it felt like his life was flashing before his eyes as he opened the doors, those being the only manual ones in the entire building.

Though, they did swing open easier than most, revealing a pitch black room, at first. The moment that he closed the doors behind himself, a faint blue glow settled upon the space.

The ceiling lit up with the light of thousands of stars, as well as a pair of pale blue moons. The domed, seemingly glass ceiling would arch over head, the panes coming together in one vibrant star. The Northstar.

Down the Northstar shone upon a silver necklace, suspended from a hook within a glass cage.

It called to him, almost, as Dorian instinctively treaded closer. Again, one step after the other, until he stopped in his tracks when something else lit up. The sudden red light in the room almost made Dorian cower on the spot, but he stood his ground.

The crimson eye looked upon him from behind the pedestal, stepping out from behind it now that he had been revealed.

Overseer: "Dorian. So nice to see you again. I didn't think you'd visit me in my home."

Dorian: "You- You... You said that you wanted to talk to me, have a drink and all that... Right?"

The Overseer had a funny way of making you second guess yourself.

Overseer: "I did. And now that you're here, why not?"

The rubber thuds made Dorian's stomach churn as the Overseer paced to the side of the room, where a small table stood with piles of shot glasses, some chipped, others brand new. From an adjacent cabinet he grabbed a bottle of whiskey, one that was undoubtedly only there to entertain the Overseer's other 'guests'.

Back he would walk though, to soon for Dorian, before coming to a halt again in front of the pale-haired one. Only one glass, of course. Dorian wondered why he had expected the Overseer to actually take a sip. He himself needed one, though.

Through flesh and bone it went, after all, when the Overseer spoke.

So he downed it, like he always did.

Overseer: "So you wanted to... Be relieved of your function?"

Dorian: "Yes!"

Dorian started a little too loudly, quickly lowering his voice.

Dorian: "Yes, I... This is not for me. Overseer, this.. Toxin.. Thing, it.. It is not me."

Overseer: "You are Viper, correct?"

Dorian: "Well, yes, but not like that! Never like that. Not until I met you..."

Overseer: "I see.. So, you wish to wash your hands of all this?"

Dorian: "Yes. I do."

Dorian tried to keep standing up straight, forcing himself to look the Overseer in the eye, as he spoke these words.

Overseer: "What then of your family?"

Dorian: "What?"

Overseer: "Will you go back to them?"

The blond one had no answer for the other, simply staring blankly as he tried to imagine going home, but he couldn't. Somehow, he couldn't.

Overseer: "I see. Then where will you go?"

Dorian: "Somewhere."

Overseer: "To the club?"

Dorian: "No."

Overseer: "To Alexander."

Dorian's eyes widened as he took a step back. The Overseer's helmet tilted, the eye remaining level as his words killed.

Dorian: "No."

Overseer: "You lie."

Dorian: "No! He doesn't want me there. I will leave. I will leave and go somewhere."

Overseer: "Speak the truth!"

Dorian knew a command when he heard one. It rang in his ears, like the Wail did, until he couldn't help it.

"I will go to Alexander! Please, please I just want to leave. Let me take him with me and leave, please."

Tears started to run down his face as desperation lined his voice.

"I'll never ask for anything again, I'll never come to you again, just let me leave!"

The Overseer took a step, then another, and another until he was in Dorian's face. The blond one swore that he could smell the gunpowder.

"Say what you want. Say what you really want and you will have it."

"I... I want- I want to-"

His ears wouldn't stop ringing. What was that sound? Was that his blood?

"Look into the eye in the abyss. Look into it and tell me what you want."

"I want to go home!"

"The Eye, Dorian! It knows you. What does it say?"

"I- I..."

I want to disappear.

Banshee's Wail

Chapter Summary

Just a (very short) game of cards.

Sorry guys, deadlines today so not a lot of time...

Contrary to popular belief, the inner city of Coredam knew many places just beyond the PKF's reach and dictation. One such place was a rather seedy hole in the wall, or so it seemed.

A bar, a well-known one, named after the original tavern that once stood on those same foundations. The Crescent Rose, it was called, and it had some of the best drinks in all of Coredam.

Even so, it was not visited as much as it used to be. Rumour had it that it used to be the Overseer's favourite place to kick back after work. Many there claimed to know the man.

Maybe there was only one that truly did.

His eyes were a bleeding red, his skin pale yet dull, like ash, as he peered from his seat in the back, shuffling a deck of cards.

He was called the Banshee, and no one ever came there to talk to him. No, none ever talked, yet some dared challenge him.

That night, a challenger walked in, his shoulders broad and chest full. He paced towards the table in one straight line, coming to a halt just in front, to look upon the one with the charcoal hair.

No words were uttered as he took a seat at the other end of the table. The game had begun the moment he walked in. He knew the rules.

The Banshee laid out his cards before him.

One card, the visage of a great depth, fathomless, empty.

Second, a frozen lake, barren yet breathing.

Finally, to which the Banshee finally made a sound, the end.

His expression remained stoic, but his breathing had changed. It had grown irregular, lost in thought. The man ahead of him frowned, gently tapping his hands on the table as if to conjure

up a ghost.

Challenger: "I... I'm still here. Hah! I am still here!"

The man's bewildered celebrations fell on death ears as the Banshee gathered his cards and got up with the loud shoving of his eat. It scraped harshly over the floor and fell over as the red-eyed one started to pace towards the door.

Challenger: "Hey! Hey- Wait! Y-you still owe me something!"

Without turning around, the Banshee dropped a small blue gemstone upon the floor, to which the challenger immediately scrambled, pocketing it and guarding it closely, as if it could disappear any moment. By the time he looked up again, the Banshee was already gone.

Trigger

Chapter Summary

One bullet away.

Nick

I've never held a rifle before. The metal feels scalding hot and dangerous, even when it isn't loaded. I feel like it might burn my hands if I hold it too long.

But what else can I do with it? I am already here, on this rooftop... In just a few minutes, Accada will be right there, on that boulevard with those trees.

He will come out of that glass door over there and I will shoot him. I will aim and wait for the scope to turn green, then I'll pull the trigger.

I'll pull the trigger and stop him. I'll pull the trigger and he won't hurt anyone ever again.

I can feel my hands getting sticky, this waiting is killing me.

Fuck, Alex, if you could see me now... Would you strangle me or throw me off this building?

I think I'd do both.

Maybe I will.

What am I doing here? Is this what I want?

I want this, I think, but I don't think I want to *do* this. Raven would do it if they could.

I can be like them. I can be Collective.

Viper

I can't be like them. I can't be the Eye.

I don't want this. I don't want to do this. Seer would do it if he could.

What is this? What have I become?

Maybe this is me.

I think it could.

Damn it, Alex, if you could see me now... Would you kiss me like you used to or would you leave me here, behind?

It is so cold, this place is killing me.

I'll do this and I'll stop them. I'll do this just once and I'll free them.

They will writhe against change and I will hold them. They will writhe against the deep and I'll keep them still.

But what else can I do? I am already right here, in the dark... In just a few moments, the Eye will open and I will remember no more.

I've never seen eternity before. The pit seems freezing cold but peaceful, even when it's dark. I feel like it might swallow me whole if I linger too long.

Shellshock

Chapter Summary

Cultures all across the world use fire and shattering noise to ward off the dark, and the creatures that lurk within.

Death is a weird thing. One moment, you are standing next to a man and, the next, you stand alone.

I swear that I heard a whistle on the wind, when his body hit the floor. Vick Accada. Immortal by all rights, like his company, now mortal on the concrete, like his company.

Accada means 'endless' in Ancient Ackelianian, yet there is nothing as endless as the world beyond the Nightingale. I looked up at the glint upon the rooftop, a green glow fading to red.

That is when it started to set in. I couldn't hear my own cries as the Banshee's Wail bellowed. I couldn't see my tears fall to the ground as that blinding spotlight descended upon his corpse.

I wept when the red-eyed ones took him away. I wept even louder when behind I stayed.

Now I could feel it. The metal burnt and engraved itself into my skin as I pulled the trigger. A sonic outburst that nearly shattered my eardrums, a flash of red, then a sound that bellowed as loud.

My heart was in my throat as the concrete swallowed up the crimson rain. I actually did it. I can't believe that I actually wanted to call you.

I almost did it, almost said it.

Al can you please pick me up.

But there's one thing worse than walking home alone, and it is seeing your face in this pouring rain.

So I did as they said. I detached the barrel and the scope. I removed the mag and the stock. I removed the battery and the dislodged the trigger.

I placed it in the case and closed it tight, made sure it wouldn't fall open and quickly retreated towards the fire escape.

I almost missed the railing and fell on my way down.

Al, if I fell, would you pick me up?

The sound is even worse so up close. I swore it made my ears bleed as I stood directly below, re-polishing the scratches on my helmet.

I was going to come get you, but I was ushered away.

They wouldn't let me stay.

Said they'd bring you home.

Not sure I trust them, but what do I know?

Nick, I haven't seen you since last night-

Please just call me.

Protector

Alex arrived home an hour later, bike parked in his garage and spare helmet in his hand, he placed the keys on the bench by the door's control panel. He had the automatic door roll down to a close, before setting the helmet down as well.

He heard rapid footsteps when Thomas burst into the room, almost crashing into Alex.

He was clearly trying to contain the tears in his eyes as he threw his arms around his holder brother.

Thomas: "FUCK! NIGHTINGALES, ALEX, ALL NIGHT I HAVE BEEN COUNTING NIGHTINGALES."

Alex quickly wrapped his arms around his younger brother's shoulders. When the other pulled away again, just a little bit, Alex saw the bags under his eyes.

Alex: "I'm fine, Thom. Nobody else got hurt."

Thomas: "Fuck you! You and Nick went completely radio silent on me, and then I check in on the Banshee Radar and it's mister Accada's face on there! Do you have any idea how scary that is?!"

Alex: "We're fine, Thom, really..."

Alex took a deep breath and sighed, before taking a step back and gripping the other's shoulders.

Alex: "We're fine. And Nick is in the clear too; I checked."

Thomas: "You should have texted me! Actually, no, kick a gate, you should have called me!"

Alex: "I tried, but they jammed the phone towers."

Thomas: "UGH"

Thomas yanked himself away from the other's grasp, before pacing over to the door and peeking through the window that sat near the ceiling, climbing up onto a stool in order to do so.

Alex: "He is still out there, going for a drink, I trust."

Thomas: "We should go pick him up."

Alex: "I don't think he wants us to right now."

Thomas: "Why not? He always calls you."

Alex: "He didn't call today."

Thomas shot Alex a concerned look.

Thomas: "What happened?"

Alex: "Someone shot Vick Accada on Syrella's Square-"

Thomas: "That is not what I asked, Al, and you know it!"

Alex: "Nick was nearby when it happened. He is probably out celebrating, you know how he is."

Thomas: "He wouldn't do that!"

The tone of Thomas' voice started to sound more and more upset, causing Alex to throw up his hands in surrender.

Alex: "Fine. But we have to let him come home on his own accord."

Thomas: "You don't usually have a problem with that."

Alex: "Hey, I saw him, okay? He didn't seem in a mood for me, so I left him be."

Thomas sighed and got off the stool, before pacing by Alex and out of the room.

Thomas: "I am going to bed."

Birds of a Feather

Nick sat quietly in the rain, already soaked and therefore not caring anymore. The weapon, he had placed behind him, beneath a ledge that could keep it dry enough, but wouldn't do the same for him.

He would glance at the locking mechanism from time to time, which had been torn up beyond use. He wondered if the key was ever used.

He took a shaky breath, trying to wash his hands with the rain water, as if it would chase away the feeling. After a little while, he would look up at the stars, as if he could see any.

Hoping that they were still out there, somewhere.

He remembered a line from a book that Alex used to read to him. He whispered it softly.

Even below a starless night, may the Northstar guide us home.

To his surprise, a response sounded from behind him, from the other side of the brick wall against which he sat.

"I know that one," the voice claimed, "An old tale, is it not?"

Unable to find the energy within himself to recall, Nick groaned, "Something like that."

"There are shelters by the harbour," the unknown one spoke, his voice soft, but deep, like a hum in a tunnel.

"I have a home."

"Forgive the assumption."

"Why aren't you at a shelter?"

"Just watching the tears," the voice stated, his words drifting as he audibly raised his gaze to the sky.

"Can't see them through the light. And the smog..."

"Most cannot."

"What, are you some kind of psychic?"

The stranger chuckled, "Some kind, yes."

"Why don't you read me my future, old man?"

"Why should I be old?" The voice seemed amused more than offended.

"You talk like a tome."

"You speak like a stray."

"I'm not a stray."

"Say that again, but slowly."

"I'm not- Fuck you."

The man snickered.

"If you are going to fuck with me tonight, at least tell me your name."

"Call me Iris."

"I guess I can return the favour... I'm Nick."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

A deep breath sounded from the other side of the wall.

"You have something for me, actually."

Nick's eyes widened for a moment, before he shot up onto his feet.

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I like to know who I am talking to."

The man climbed over the wall, indeed donning a subtle, barely visible symbol on his right sleeve that reflected the streetlight.

Nick quickly picked up the gun case and handed it over, to which Iris grasped it firmly before laying it on one arm and opening it.

First, he opened the chamber, verifying it to be empty.

Then, he typed a code into a numpad on the side, which caused the magazine to spring loose. He glanced within it, before pocketing the empty part.

He then pulled out a new mag, this one filled to the brim with sterilised copper. He placed it within and closed the case, making sure to engage the clamps before handing it back to Nick.

"I did the job, as you asked," Nick assured him, recoiling as he rubbed his hands.

"You did, which is why you are keeping this. Quite frankly, we don't want it back."

"So what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Keep it. Take it to work when needed."

"What kind of job requires me to take a sniper rifle with me to the office?"

"This one."

Nick fell silent for a moment, somehow not following until now.

"This one...?"

"Welcome to the Collective."

Non-Hostile Takeover

The businessfolk sat around an oval table, as per staple for the company. Everyone was to be included, but the table needed a clear head. A clear head, by the window, which now sat empty.

ForeverTech team leaders and managers sat in silence for many moments, before the head of engineering dared to speak up.

"We uhhh... We are missing... Another. What's his name- Alex Grey, the one from internal affairs, where is he?" The man asked, the uneasiness in his voice resonating with the rest of the room as everyone glanced around briefly, until the HR team leader spoke up.

"Actually, Alex will not be joining us today; his brother went missing after the... incident. He cleared it with me last night," she spoke, a hint of sympathy in her voice as some others only voiced frustration.

"This is not the time for family matters. We have a company to salvage," the head of accounting stated, "If anything the head of internal affairs should be the one leading this discussion."

Then the head of security chimed in, "I agree, but I do suggest that this *is*, in fact, a time for family matters. Do we have a suitable heir to the company? How many of Accada's relatives remain in the city?"

The head of accounting glared at her, "This is no time for a monarchy, Adams. We need a pragmatic CEO who can keep these cogs turning."

"I actually am of a mind with Adams, in this," engineering spoke, "Accada's work is an absolutely colossal cornerstone to modern tech. If we do not continue this company in his name, with his name, we will lose our credibility."

A deafening silence returned to the table.

"What of his son?" The leader of HR suggested, "Dorian Accada should be of age by now, why not him? He should be easy enough to tame; all we have to do is make sure that he knows his father's legacy."

"Dorian Accada is a lowlife, unfit to continue his father's legacy. If he were to rise to power, this company would be doomed," the head of communications barked.

"What of Alex? He is young, eager, and stalwart in the face of impossibility. If anyone can keep a straight face in this time, it is him," HR imagined.

"Alexander is not even here for this meeting, how can you believe him to be a fit leader?" Security retaliated, when his phone started buzzing violently.

"Set your phone to 'emergencies only', David," Accounting hissed.

"I did," Security sighed as he looked at the flood of messages coming in, when his eyes widened.

The room's attention shifted further to Security, when David got up from his seat and barked a quick command, "This meeting is broken, at my veto. We have PKF on our doorstep."

Then the elevator pinged and Communications sighed, "Smile and wave."

The elevator doors shot open just a moment later, revealing the grim black plates of PKF armour and one glaring red eye, accompanied by two lieutenants.

The board members rose from their seats, but Seer stopped them, "Don't get up on my account. We have a lot of catching up to do."

The Heir

"Board of ForeverTech, thank you for your preparedness to receive us on such short notice," the red-eyed one spoke tauntingly, while glancing around the room, invisibly.

"In light of the very recent assassination of your late CEO, Vick Accada, a vacuum has appeared in this city's power-scape. A vacuum that the PKF wishes to fill, immediately."

"I have taken the liberty to seek out your CEO's next of kin and heir, Dorian Accada. It is by birthright and his father's written will, that Dorian Accada is now legal owner and CEO of the ForeverTech corporation and all its child companies. Dorian Accada has agreed to fill this role, immediately."

The black-clad one stepped aside, to reveal a hardly recognisable, well-clothed, well-groomed young man with golden blond hair and vibrant eyes.

Dorian spoke, "Thank you, members of the board, for being so quick to respond to the tragedy of my father's death. I promise that this matter will be resolved quickly, with my ascension. Each of you are expected to carry out your functions as per usual."

The darkened figure stepped in behind Dorian, the red gaze peering over his golden crown.

Dorian hit the last nail, "This meeting is adjourned. You are dismissed."

Some were quick to glance around the rest of the room, trying to detect a hint of resistance, but none would stand against the crimson eye and his tears. In silence, they started abandoning the room, one by one, until only Dorian and the PKF forces remained.

"I expect your full cooperation and loyalty, CEO of ForeverTech. We will meet again, soon," the strange and powerful voice sounded behind Dorian.

Without turning around, the newly appointed, de-facto king of Coredam turned replied, "Under your guiding gaze."

The eye and his soldiers left the room immediately after their confirmation, leaving behind a misty-eyed Dorian, who took a seat behind the meeting table and wept.

The Bleeding Eye

Two Days Later

"Mortals of the fold," the speaker declared from the head of the room, "The Eye opens its gaze once more. May Aval's cause shine upon you."

Seer sighed, his eyes lazily scanning the room as he looked for his liaison. Once he spotted her, he wasted no time and paced over, his heavy boots leaving audible steps behind.

"Ah, Knight Seer, welcome back," she spoke with a courteous bow, which Seer returned. "Oathkeeper Sage, ever an honour."

"Oh, come now, Seer," she hummed, amused, "You were never one for such formalities. Why start now?"

"Just thrilled to be in good company, I suppose," Alex retaliated, his eyes glancing up from the floor as he straightened his back.

"It has been years since you last visited us," she hummed. "I never liked the theatrics, as you say," Seer muttered, looking around at the small crowd in the dining hall.

Filled to the brim, that ball room. It was old and regal, built in the ruins of what was once a great stronghold. Even now, one could almost hear the sound of royal orchestra, the names of nobility from far and wide ringing out as they entered the ball room.

A chandelier, hanging overhead, in the middle of the room, suspended from a dark steel chain, alight with a thousand, tiny red flames. The light, trapped and then refracted in the colourless crystals below, bounced off the mirrored walls, making the room look bigger than it was.

Seer hated it.

"Yet you are back now; undoubtedly with questions or a request, of your own," the woman saw through him.

"Of course, you would be the one to guess. Can't an old friend visit?" Seer's voice remained stoic, yet he denied nothing.

"He can. If he has something to trade for his treasures," the Oathkeeper whispered wisely.

"Then it is good that I didn't come emptyhanded," the Seer muttered in return, before pulling out a small satchel of weathered, old leather.

The Sage needed not look inside, before identifying the contents.

"The Northstar's Broch," she hummed, intrigue painted across her tone like a challenge.

"I made a deal with the Banshee. One artefact, for another."

"What was promised for it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

The Sage smirked, "Good choice."

The woman's black dress flowed over the floor behind her, with crimson woven like rivers, flowing down her back into intricate patterns, with a rose on the small of her back, as she paced away from the middle of the room and into a private quarters, a guest room.

The Seer kept his eyes firmly on the back of her head, as his own, more utilitarian garments sat firmly against his skin. His black and red heat suit was skin tight, leaving a virtually transparent outline of his body clearly visible above his belt, below which he wore military issue utility pants, which covered his features well, in antithesis.

Once he had followed her into the room, he was quick to close the door behind the both of them. They stared at each other for a moment, in silence, as Sage sat down on the foot end of the bed.

A grin slipped through Seer's statue-like visage. Sage returned a smirk of her own, before Seer walked over and sat beside her on the bed.

"So, the Banshee, huh?" Sage's words were softer now.

"That's the one," Seer returned with a soft sigh.

The two of them exchanged another look, before Seer flopped down onto his back.

"You look tired."

"It's been a long week," Seer muttered quietly, as he stared up at the lavishly painted ceiling, which displayed some kind of ancient myth from one of Sarna's works.

The Sage joined him, lying down and looking up at the same painting.

"Just how much did you like him?" Her question had a hint of worry in it.

"A lot, but I had to do it."

"Hm."

The two remained in a few moments of silence, until Sage spoke up again.

"What if I visit you in Coredam?"

Seer shook his head faintly, "Too dangerous. Your place is here, under Aval."

"Yours is too."

"You have more to lose."

The Sage rolled onto her side and prodded herself up a bit with her arm, looking down at Seer, next to her.

"You sell your needs short," she stated, placing a reassuring hand upon his shoulder.

Seer glanced at her, before looking back up at the ceiling, remaining silent.

Sage sighed, "You think you are the only one who sees through that veil?"

"Just trying to avoid another Aval-Ephes situation here."

"With whom?"

"Does it matter?"

Sage scoffed, "Why, yes, Seer, for some of us it really does. It's not like you notify me of the stuff you do out there."

Seer turned his head away, but Sage placed her hand on his cheek and brought his gaze back to her.

"Tell me, Seer."

"You already know."

"I want to hear you say it."

Seer lifted his head and carefully kissed her lips, before pulling back again and staring into her eyes for a moment.

Sage let go of his cheek, which prompted him to sit back up.

He stood up, off the bed, and fixed his clothes as much as he could, before slowly moving towards the door.

"Knight."

"Oathkeeper."

"Stay safe out there."

Seer glanced at her with his peripheral, saying nothing more when he left the room, nor when he closed the door.

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