

Hidden In The Cold

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Hidden In The Cold

by [Echovous](#)

Summary

It's only a tool... Stasis is only a tool, Shiro repeated over and over in his head as he focused on the crystalline structure entrapping him. Harnessing it was the only way out, so he couldn't be scared of it. He needed to realize he was strong enough to restrain its influence on him... just as he did with the Light.

Notes

This is a direct continuation of "Second Chances" even though it can stand alone. The only major difference is the fact that Shiro-4's Ghost now has a canon name—Suzume!

So sorry, Aimi! R.I.P., we'll all miss you.

Enjoy!

Chapter 1

“He’s calling you again.”

Shiro rolled over in bed, pressing his face into the pillow that—despite having recently been fluffed out—was still a hard slab.

“Shiro?”

“Tell him ‘no,’” he groaned against the thin fabric. *It was way too early for this...*

“I don’t think he’s going to take ‘no’ for an answer this time,” there was a hint of humor in Suzume’s voice.

“Fine,” he stretched, groaning again as the cords in his back decompressed. “Put him through.”

“Just did,” Suzume announced.

Shiro sat up against the headboard, rubbing his face. “What do you want, Zavala?”

“Shiro-4,” the Vanguard Commander began before seeming to pause at his voice. “I apologize for contacting you so early.”

“No, no,” Shiro shook his helm as if the Awoken man could see him. “I’ve been up for about an hour. What do you need?”

“Your answer,” he responded. “Have you considered a position as Hunter Vanguard?”

Shiro paused. He’d known this was coming but he still didn’t know what to say.

Zavala continued. “As you know, we are still without one, and as a consequence, we are weaker.” He sighed. “I asked you six months ago if you’d be willing to consider the position. It’s time I hear your answer.”

Shiro remained silent. While he *had* told Zavala that he’d consider the position, he’d only said that to get him off his back. In reality, Hunter Vanguard was not a position he’d willingly accept. Unless he’d been dared, but Cayde hadn’t made a clear dare. *The main reason they were having this huge problem with finding another one...* Obviously, one would have to be forcibly appointed, and it was looking like Zavala had already chosen *him*. Though the Commander obviously wanted him to willingly accept it...

“I mean, it’s your call,” he shrugged, unable to keep the slight frustration out of his voice.

“No. It’s your call, too,” Zavala asserted. “The Vanguard needs to be united and... there are reasons I hesitate to simply appoint you myself. Most notably your... *relationship* with a certain individual.”

“Hey, we’re not—“ He tried to protest.

“You need to *want* the position. Otherwise—despite your obvious skill—it’s hard for me to expect you to make an unbiased decision if the situation calls for it...”

“I’m not in a relationship with Drifter and I’m definitely not biased towards him,” he cut in, then added. “Just so we’re clear, Commander.”

Zavala was silent for a moment before sighing. “I hope you wouldn’t be. Too many are falling into his scams or taking his words for the truth... We cannot afford this. Not with the Pyramids in our system and how little we know about them...”

Shiro rubbed at his face again. He didn’t need to be reminded about the Darkness ships. They’d known it was coming for nearly a year and suspected it ever since the Traveler awoke. Now that it was here though, things were at a standstill and it felt like... like they weren’t prepared.

“I’ll give you more time to think,” Zavala broke the silence to speak. “Just know that enough is uncertain. The position of Hunter Vanguard cannot remain this way. For all our sakes.”

Zavala didn’t wait for him to answer before closing communication.

Shiro sat back against the headboard, closing his eyes for a moment as he prepared to get up and start his day.

“Big Blue thinks we’re in a relationship?”

There was a shift beside him that rocked the whole bed. Shiro tipped his chin down to see Drifter rolling over, an arm outstretched to wrap around him. The man was still half asleep as he pulled him closer, trying to get him to lay back down. Shiro considered spending another ten minutes in bed but ultimately decided against it. He was way too awake now.

“As If giving you what you want every few months is a relationship,” Shiro smirked as he peeled Drifter’s arms off of him.

“Ouch,” Drifter faked a hurt expression. “Do I not make it nice for you?”

“You make it fine,” he said, then murmured, “For someone who only delivers a few times a year.”

“Oh, is that a challenge!” Drifter shot up in bed, completely awake now. “Give me a week! No, give me a weekend, and you’ll be takin’ back everything ya just said! Trust!”

“Start building stamina, then,” Shiro chuckled in response—choosing to omit the fact that his weekends were getting shorter and shorter. Soon there wouldn’t be time for their little *visits*. Honestly, that wouldn’t be too bad. It could possibly even *lower* his stress level...

He liked Drifter. Mostly... But what he didn’t like was the man’s attitude about the Pyramids. He just wasn’t taking them seriously... Like so many other things... He climbed out of bed and headed for his bathroom to get ready.

“Hey, how do you expect me to build stamina without *you*?” Drifter called after him.

“You got hands,” he called back as he closed the door.

As an Exo, there wasn't much he needed to do in the bathroom when compared to humans like Drifter, (Though Drifter could use it a little more than he currently did...) Still, he preferred a bit of privacy, especially when Drifter was staying over. So he used this time to organize his schedule for the day and go through messages that were sent last night, finding one Suzume sent a few minutes ago:

Waiting out on the Wall for you. Take as much time as you need! ;)

He marked the message as ‘read’ then walked back into the bedroom. Drifter had moved to sit up against the headboard and looked up at him when he walked through.

“You better not be leavin’ for a patrol.”

Shiro shrugged, already in the connected room to get himself armored. “I’m on schedule today.”

“Put yourself off schedule,” he whined.

“Can’t.”

“Ugh.” Drifter groaned, sinking back into the sheets. “Now the bed’s gonna get all cold...”

“That’s your main worry?” He smirked. “You should probably be getting up anyway so you don’t have to do the ‘walk of shame’ when the Wall’s busy.”

“I’m not ashamed of nothin’,” Drifter responded with a smirk of his own. “Though you’re probably right about me needin’ ya get outta here. Mind handing me my coat?”

“The one you’re always wearing?” Shiro asked as he clipped his cloak to his armor.

“That would be it!”

Shiro reached down to grab the worn garment that had fallen from the hangar it’d been haphazardly hung on last night. It was surprisingly clean. *Drifter actually did prepare for their visits.* He rolled it up into a ball and threw it at the man who easily caught it and began to dress.

“You know, ya wouldn’t have ta get up so damn early if you helped with my Gambit,” Drifter commented.

This time, Shiro had to force out a natural-sounding laugh. *Drifter’s Gambit. Another thing he didn’t approve of... Though his disapproval only caused conflict for himself.*

On one side, he understood Drifter’s motivations and why using the Darkness was a good idea. As their threats grew bigger, they needed to expand their arsenal... though at the same

time, he didn't feel like this normalization of Darkness, or at least the concept of it, was timely with the Pyramids looming threateningly over half of the solar system.

They just didn't understand it enough. It needed study, but more importantly, it needed to be treated seriously.

"I'm serious, ya know," Drifter was out of bed and fully dressed now. "Runnin' Gambit has been a solo act so far, though I wouldn't mind you helping out. I'd love it actually."

"I don't think any of the Guardians playing your Gambit would love it. You're funny. I'd just make it boring," Shiro joked, standing at the door with a hand on the knob. *He really needed to be going...*

Drifter shook his head. "Nah, I think you'd be great at it! C'mon! How about for just a day?"

"I need to get going," he opened the door, standing half in and half out of his apartment.

"Lame!" Drifter crossed his arms, stomping forward to follow him out.

Shiro turned to lock the door behind him.

"Alright, I best be startin' my Gambit," Drifter said, giving him a quick hug from behind. "You comin' back here later?"

"Maybe," he finished with the lock, turning around to receive a quick peck from Drifter, who immediately back-stepped to avoid retaliation.

"Then I'll see ya," the man gave him one last smirk before heading down the hall.

Shiro stared after him for a moment before heading the opposite way to the Wall's hangar.

— —

"You're 3 minutes late," Suzume put on a playful tone as she floated up to him. "Have fun?"

He shrugged, unable to get himself in the mood to joke with her. "Eh. Drifter was just running his mouth about Gambit again."

Suzume grew silent, most likely thinking. With how perceptive she was coupled with how naturally close they were as Guardian and Ghost, it didn't take her long to catch onto what was bothering him. "You should tell him you don't like Gambit."

Shiro sighed. "Yeah, I should, but I dunno... It's hard for me to bring it up with him."

Suzume just stared at him, waiting for him to explain.

"I mean, you and I both know how hard he's worked to create Gambit, and now it's a success. Mostly," he lowered his voice with another sigh. "I just can't get past its mechanics and how it's making Guardians use the *Darkness* against each other... Sure, nothing bad's happened yet, but that was before the Darkness was in our system..."

“And before the majority of Guardians were *desensitized* to it all,” Suzume added.

“That too.”

Suzume flicked her shell in what he took as a shrug. “I think you should talk to him if it’s bothering you. It’s bothered me for quite a while, though I stopped saying anything since I know you two are close.”

“Yeah, and I don’t really want to ruin that.”

Such a slippery slope with Drifter...

“You wouldn’t be ‘ruining’ anything if Drifter decided Gambit was a dealbreaker for him.”

“True,” he said. “But still... I dunno.”

“What don’t you know?”

“Just...” He shook his head, struggling to put it into words. “I just don’t know how to make this work. People are always harder to figure out than guns and...”

“Well, is he not making you happy? Let’s start with that,” Suzume suggested.

“He is,” Shiro answered honestly. “When I’m with him, at least. He’s different. Doesn’t focus on Gambit all that much,” he let out a dry laugh. “I guess when we were deciding to start this little relationship, I thought he’d grow out of the idea...”

Suzume’s voice grew serious. “Then he’s not making you happy, is he?”

He sighed, exasperated. “No, I guess he’s making me kind of frustrated.”

Shiro stepped out onto the main walk on the Wall, where the Vanguard had outfitted as a base of operations. His eyes were drawn up to the Traveler in the sky. It’s always been there, but recently it just felt strange. It had reformed.

Without being an expert, he knew that this was happening for a reason.

“So that’s his fault.”

“Well, it’s partially mine, too,” he admitted. “I’ve been meaning to talk to him about this stuff but just haven’t.”

“Because you’re scared?” Suzume asked.

Shiro snorted. “No, I’m not scared. I just...” he sighed. “Drifter always has an explanation or a reason why I shouldn’t be worried. He never addresses my actual problems with Gambit and the Darkness and... Let’s not talk about this now, okay?”

“Okay,” Suzume agreed, although it sounded like there was much more she wanted to say.

Just as he and Suzume entered the hangar, a feminine voice called out to him.

“Hey, Shiro! Ship’s almost ready!”

He looked in the direction of the voice to see a blond-haired, tattooed woman working minor repairs on his jumpship. Some light damage he’d received when speeding through the asteroid belt.

“Amanda, you didn’t have to,” he approached.

“Don’t even start,” she swung down to land on the ground in front of him. “This thing right here’s my pride and joy ever since I repaired it from the scrap heap it was a couple’a years ago.”

“But how much does this cost?”

“You? Nothin.”

“I’m talking about *you*,” Shiro clarified. “You don’t get paid for cosmetic jobs.”

“This ain’t cosmetic,” She leaned back against his jumpship’s landing gear. “Scratches like this only expand when warping to a destination.”

“Yeah, but...”

She pushed off of the landing gear, gently elbowing him in the side. “Don’t worry about it, Shiro. Knowing my work made a friend’s day happier is all the payment I need.”

He caught the flash of grief in Amanda’s eyes. She tried to blink it away, but there was no question about who she was thinking of. *Cayde*.

The former Hunter Vanguard had been great friends with them both. Since his death—his *murder*—he and Amanda had grown a bit closer. He figured it was because she could see a bit of Cayde in him. Even though they’d never really talked before Cayde passed on, it was fine. They both missed Cayde.

“I’m still gonna wire some Glimmer to you later,” he whispered.

“You better not! I’ll just wire it right back!”

“I’ll close my account. There’ll be nothing to wire it to.”

“Well, you’ll have to hide your Glimmer somewhere. I’ll just slip it in there!”

“Good luck,” he smirked. “My caches are notoriously hard to find.”

“Oh, I don’t need luck to—“

Amanda’s communicator went off behind her, blasting Commander Zavala’s voice to the entire hangar.

“Holliday! Come in, Holliday!”

The tattooed woman ran over to where she’d left it on the workbench. “Y-Yeah?”

“Do *not* let Shiro—or any Vanguard Scout—leave the hangar!”

“Uh, he hasn’t yet, Commander,” she answered, glancing over to meet Shiro’s eyes with a confused expression.

“Good.”

When Zavala didn’t explain himself, Amanda spoke back into the communicator. “Wait, what’s goin’ on? Why can’t he leave?”

There was a brief pause. “I’m sorry, Holliday, but this is Vanguard business. I need to speak with him personally.”

Before Zavala could close communication, Shiro stepped up beside Amanda to speak into the device. “I’m right here, Commander. What’s going on?”

“Shiro?” Another pause. Longer this time. “You cannot leave for your Mercury patrol. In fact, I want you in my office as soon as possible.”

Shiro glanced at Amanda, seeing her concern, before continuing. “And why is that?”

“Because Mercury, Titan, Io, and Mars have disappeared.”

Chapter 2

“Disappeared?” Shiro was the first to break the heavy silence the Commander’s words brought. “W-What do you mean?”

“I mean that they’re gone, or at least not within reach,” Zavala answered. “Research done by Asher Mir—before he was lost with Io—indicated that objects consumed by the Pyramids were not destroyed, but that is besides the point...”

“So there’s—” Shiro cut himself off. *How was he even supposed to respond to this? The Darkness had taken parts of their solar system.*

“What about Sloane? Wasn’t she on Titan?” Amanda asked, face twisting into a look of distress.

“Unfortunately, Deputy Commander Sloane has been lost. Along with so many others...” Zavala murmured.

Amanda closed her eyes tightly, squeezing out the tears forming despite her attempts to hold them back. Shiro watched her, unsure of what to do. The two women had worked together in the Red War, becoming great friends. *Losing Sloane would be devastating for Amanda...*

“Shiro-4,” Zavala continued, quick to change the topic. “I think you know what I’m going to ask of you.”

Hunter Vanguard...

Shiro remained silent. He couldn’t be expected to make a choice like this, not now. Not when his head was spinning with this information about the missing planets and what this meant for them. It wasn’t right. It felt as though he were being pressured—or at least more pressured than he already had been. *Zavala wanted him to make a choice but it wasn’t even a choice.*

“Shiro, you okay?”

He looked up to see that Amanda had muted the communicator, looking at him with deep concern.

He nodded. “Yeah, I just need a sec.”

Amanda quietly held the communicator, giving him time. This allowed his thoughts to organize themselves, and he came up with what he needed to do first: *find Drifter.*

With the Darkness making a move against their system, he was interested in what Drifter and his Darkness positivity would say.

“Shiro-4? Shiro-4, are you still there?” Zavala spoke through the vocalizer when Amanda unmuted it.

She looked at him, whispering, “want me to cover for you?”

He nodded, giving her a grateful smile.

She smiled back. “Nah, Commander. He just left.”

Shiro tapped on his ship, silently asking if it was ready for him to take. Amanda responded with a thumbs up, pointing at one of the hangar frames to get the ship out from where it was suspended.

“In a ship?” Zavala asked.

“Nope,” Amanda answered. “He went back to the Wall. Not sure where though.”

“Alright, I’ll find him. Thank you, Amanda.”

Zavala cut communication just as Shiro was in his cockpit, taking off from the hangar with a final wave from Amanda.

— —

“Shiro! Wasn’t expectin’ ta see ya here!” Drifter greeted him at the Derelict’s airlock, letting him inside.

He gave him a big hug and pat on the back—which Shiro allowed—before leading him up to the Gambit viewing area. It was just a small room near the cockpit, set up with an old couch and a dozen small screens. He watched Drifter fall backwards onto the couch and get comfortable from where he stood in the doorway.

“Thought you were on patrol. On Mercury or whatever,” Drifter said.

“Was supposed to. Before it disappeared.”

“Wait, what?!” Drifter laughed then stopped when he saw his humorless expression. “Hold up, you don’t mean...”

“The Pyramid?” Shiro asked, surprised Drifter didn’t know already. “I do.”

Drifter’s face froze into a rare look of deep concern. “Hm... She said we’d have more time...” he mumbled.

“Who said what?” Shiro asked, following Drifter as he turned to leave the room.

“Uh... Don’t worry about it.”

“Drifter,” he scowled.

“Don’t *worry*,” the man looked back with a wink. “She’s not competition.”

Shiro’s scowl only deepened. “That’s not what I’m asking. Who is she and why did she say we’d ‘have more time?’”

“Babe,” Drifter put his hands on his shoulders, stopping him in his tracks. “You don’t gotta worry about it, okay?”

“Drifter—“

The green-cloaked man began to push him back towards the ship’s dock. Shiro fought against him, pushing him until they were at a standstill.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s going on,” Shiro finally got the upper hand, shoving Drifter into the wall.

The green-cloaked paused, putting a hand to his shoulder to rub where he’d hit it. For a moment, Drifter stared at him silently, as if he were contemplating on what to say. A moment later he straightened himself, deciding.

“Get comfortable, then.”

Shiro narrowed his eyes. “The hell does that mean?”

Drifter smirked. “You said you weren’t leaving, so I won’t force ya. Just hope ya don’t mind guests.”

Shiro couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling at the mention of *guests*. Drifter was known for the questionable crowds he involved himself with—the Spider being one of them. And considering how Shiro was one-for-one for being fucked over by “friends” of Drifter, meeting more of his friends didn’t exactly bring excitement.

“Hey, guys, Gambit’s done for the day,” Drifter spoke into a device on the wall. “Clean up the Primevals and I’ll put in a little extra,” he then stepped away from the device, heading for the front of the ship.

Shiro followed him, still uneasy.

Drifter turned to look at him, laughing. “I was serious about getting comfortable! It’s gonna be a long trip!”

“Where are we even going?”

Drifter lifted his fingers. “Two places. First to Luna to pick up ol’ Moondust, then straight to Europa.”

Shiro didn’t have time to process who or what “Moondust” was before he’d snapped out: “Why Europa?”

Drifter paused for a moment, obviously surprised at the sharpness to his tone. “Well, it’s got exactly what I need... I take it you don’t like Europa?”

“No. It’s more than that. Europa... It’s... You wouldn’t really understand.”

“Try ta help me, at least.”

Shiro sighed. “It’s an Exo thing...”

Drifter nodded, listening intently.

“There’s Clovis Bray facilities on Europa. A lot of them, and it’s... I’ll just say that weird things happen to Exos in these facilities. Blackouts, hallucinations... It’s bad... But the worst part is digging into the files. Finding something out that should’ve stayed hidden...”

Drifter was surprisingly quiet, whispering. “Like who ya were before?”

“Exactly,” he nodded.

“And you don’t wanna know who you were before?”

“Not really,” he shrugged. “Most Exos don’t. Who we were in the past doesn’t matter now.”

“I can understand that,” Drifter said. “Though it does make me a bit curious...”

“That makes only one of us,” Shiro muttered.

Drifter just chuckled, sitting in the pilot’s seat and plugging in coordinates. Shiro sat beside him, in no mood to talk. *He didn’t like when Drifter kept things from him...*

Luckily the trip to Luna wasn’t that long. Drifter had recently upgraded his ship with a warp drive, allowing him to get to planets instantly—which *would’ve been nice to have during the Red War*. Still, it wasn’t long before they touched down on Earth’s moon.

“Heya, Moondust,” Drifter called out with a big grin. “Get in!”

The woman frowned at both of them before approaching. Though before she entered the ship, she briefly stopped at Shiro’s side, three eyes narrowing. “I wouldn’t expect you to be working with that Rat...”

“Likewise,” He half-shouldered/half-shivered. *There was a freezing aura about Eris... Something that felt physically cold... He couldn’t explain it, but something was different...*

Her lip quirked up at the comeback before falling back into a frown, turning to Drifter. “How long will it take to get to Europa? Is our contact already there?”

“Little less than a day. An’ I haven’t checked with our contact yet, but I will,” Drifter ushered her to the main room, Shiro following right behind them. “Want anything to drink?”

“No,” she answered.

“Any snacks?”

“No.”

“You sure? I’m pretty stacked on—“

“An extra room would be fine,” she glared at him. “So that I may be spared from your... hospitality.”

He chuckled. “Alright, I’ve gotta room for ya. Even has its own bed. So you can do whatever chants or rituals ya usually do in peace.”

“Great...” her voice came out like a growl.

“Just over—“

“I can sense where it is,” she interrupted, sounding frustrated.

They both just stopped in their tracks, watching the woman as she made her way down the hall and entered a room.

“So...” He turned to Drifter, whispering. “You’re really working with Eris?”

He just shrugged back. “Yeah.”

“She doesn’t seem too happy about that...”

Drifter shrugged again. “She’s like that, but hey, we get along. Well, mostly cuz she’s the only one I can talk Darkness with.”

Talk Darkness? Shiro wanted to roll his eyes. *Of course he was talking Darkness with Eris...*

“Anyway, you wanna drink?”

He couldn’t help but smirk. “Sure, I could go for one.”

— —

Though they had more than one drink, they were likely only one away from getting shit-faced.

“Come on,” Shiro was pulling the green-robed man up from the couch. He wasn’t even trying to stand so Shiro had to yank him hard.

“Ow,” Drifter pulled his arm back, stumbling backwards on his feet a bit. “I thought it was gonna be a couch night,” the man yawned.

“Sleep here if you want then, I’m taking your bed,” Shiro turned to leave, a little wobbly on his legs.

“I change my mind,” Drifter stumbled after him, wrapping his arms around his shoulders from behind mostly to keep himself standing.

Normally, Shiro would’ve shouldered him off and let him fall to the floor, but he just dragged Drifter into the captain’s quarters and flopped down. Drifter’s arms were still around him, holding him against him.

“Two days with Shiro... In a row... Badass...” Drifter murmured where his face was pressed into his back.

He glanced over his shoulder. While he enjoyed cuddling (sometimes), Drifter had completely passed out once they’d hit the bed. He was now snoring, mouth open, with drool pooling at the edge of his lip.

“Get off,” he pushed on Drifter until the man was pressed all the way against the wall.

Drifter continued to snore, fast asleep.

Shiro found himself slipping into sleep, too...

Exo dreams could be strange. Violent battles, unknown faces... Towers... The Deep Stone Crypt... Fields of black grass...

In this dream, however, he was on patrol.

It was normal, for the most part. He had his sidearm at the ready as he entered an old Cosmodrome building. These buildings were severely worn down, but this one was different. It was covered in ice like it was some meat locker.

He kept going, crawling over enough ice to fill a frozen landscape. Now he was curious what was in the ice. What was generating it? No building in the Cosmodrome was covered inside and out by ice, but somehow this one was...

Shiro stopped when his boot knocked against something hard. He reached down, snatching up an angular object that gave him pause.

It was a shard of the Pyramid...

He should’ve dropped it, should’ve gotten out of this building, but he could only stare at it. This was what Drifter talked so much about... Using the power of the Darkness for good... He turned the shard over in his hands, tracing the seams with his fingers. Nothing was working against these stupid things... Maybe...

No, he should smash it.

Maybe Drifter was right. Maybe it was just a tool...

Darkness corrupts. It'll corrupt you.

Yeah, but that's true with every sort of power. Even the Light...

This isn't Light, it's Darkness.

So what, He turned the shard over again. These Pyramids are making a move, and so far, Light hasn't been able to stop them... Maybe fighting Dark with Dark will be different.

He tucked the shard under his arm, climbing deeper into the ice.

— —

“Listen ta this, Moondust.”

Shiro stretched out his joints as he followed Drifter's voice to the cockpit. He'd been left alone in bed, which made him a little annoyed. *Though, that being said, it would probably be better to keep their relationship a secret from Eris. If the woman couldn't sense it already.*

“Listen to what?” He announced his presence as he entered, instantly locking up when he heard a distinct Fallen voice coming through the comms.

One that was speaking English...

Drifter turned around in his chair first, catching the look of pure rage on Shiro's face quick enough to react to it. “Hey, hey, just relax!” He tried.

Shiro was already stomping up to the communicator. “That's Variks!”

“It is, but—“

“Let me talk to him!”

“It's a oneway transmission,” Eris provided from where she sat.

“Then where is he?!”

“Europa,” Drifter answered, reaching up to place a hand on his shoulder. “Same place we're going, now calm down.”

“I'm going to kill him,” he growled. “Right after I drag him back to the Tower. He *will* answer for what he did.”

“Unfortunately, you may have to wait on that,” Eris commented.

“What?” He looked over at her.

“Variks warned of a rising Fallen army on Europa,” she answered. “House Salvation.”

“Yeah,” Drifter added. “We may need his help dealing with them, though it depends on what our contact says.”

“I will not be working with him,” Shiro stated. “I can’t. He might not have not pulled the trigger, but I just can’t.”

Drifter nodded solemnly. “I understand, but...”

“‘But’ nothing. He caused Cayde’s death,” Shiro tried to keep his voice even. “In fact, he’s lucky I don’t shoot him the second I see him!”

“Alright, that’s enough.”

Shiro shook Drifter off of him, enraged that he would even argue about avenging Cayde. “You—“

“Shiro,” Eris interrupted, speaking gently. “If not by you, Variks *will* see justice. Look at the radar. There’s a Vanguard ship in the region and a high chance they picked up the same transmission.”

He glanced over at the radar, seeing the ship Eris was talking about. It quelled his rage slightly, but not enough to shake him on Variks. *The Fallen has been hiding for two years! It was about time they found him.*

“Fuck, the Vanguard’s here?” Drifter groaned.

“Oh fuck, the Vanguard’s here,” Shiro mocked.

“Hey, ya don’t gotta be nasty,” Drifter looked hurt.

“And you don’t have to be insensitive! You know how close Cayde and I were! You know how much his death has been eating me up! Yet you can sit here and tell me to calm down?!” He snapped. “I’m done. I’m leaving with my ship and—“

Before he’d fully pivoted around, a frigid feeling spread through his body. He glanced down, finding shards of ice forming on him.

In another instant, he was completely frozen.

Chapter 3

“Shiro!” He could hear his Ghost, Suzume, shriek in terror.

He struggled, trying to get to her, but the vice-like grip of the ice held him in place. He could only move his eyes. They strained to follow Suzume. The Ghost was circling around him, crying out to him. He tensed against the ice, fighting to get to her—to *get out!*

“Ah, geez, it’s happening,” Drifter shot up from his seat, putting his hands on the ice as if he could reach through it to free him.

Eris stood too, though much slower. “Shiro,” she spoke firmly as if giving instructions. “You can’t fight *against* it.”

Then what was he supposed to do? What was even happening?! He struggled harder, only tiring himself faster. Like the ice was weakening his Light...

“Listen, Shiro. *Harness* it. Use your knowledge to exploit its weaknesses. That is the only way,” Eris continued.

What was she talking about? W-What was she trying to get him to do?

“Not the only way,” Drifter argued with Eris, sounding a bit distressed. “I’m breakin’ him outta there!”

“Don’t. He must break out himself!” Eris tried to stop Drifter, but the man had already pulled his pistol from his belt, pointing it straight at him.

Shiro stiffened as much as the icy prison would allow, flinching when the gun went off. He expected a bullet hole in his chest, but fell to the floor unharmed, covered in shattered ice.

“Drifter,” he gasped out from the floor, shaking from both the cold and stress.

“What was that?!” Suzume yelled. “What did you do to him?!”

“Nothin’, sweetheart,” Drifter lifted his hands in a placating gesture.

“That wasn’t *nothing*,” She snapped. “Just *look* at him!”

“Guys,” Shiro winced. Their raised voices pounded in his head, making him unbearably dizzy.

The arguing stopped immediately and hands reached down for him. Drifter and Eris pulled him off the floor, carefully setting him down in the empty pilot’s seat.

“I’m gonna go get him something, stay here with him,” Drifter tapped Eris on the shoulder before leaving the cockpit.

Shiro glanced up at the woman, watching her as she sat in the seat next to him. “What... happened...” He spoke as evenly as he could manage.

She stared down at her hands, eyes unusually dim beneath the black cloth. “Dark powers.”

“Darkness?!” Suzume’s shell tightened around herself.

“Yes. A physical form of it called ‘Stasis,’” Eris answered, still focused on her hands. Shiro glanced down, finding a dark blue glow emanating from them.

“*You used the Darkness—Stasis—on me?!*” His eyes brightened in shock. *When had she even learned it? Had she been corrupted? Was she corrupting him?*

Eris glanced at him, shaking her head with a frown. “No.”

“So what happened?” He snapped.

Eris just looked back at her hands. Tiny Stasis crystals were beginning to grow larger and larger. Shiro found himself both mesmerized and terrified by the display. That was *Darkness*. That was ancient power in direct opposition to the Light—wielded by a Guardian...

She looked back up at him. “That power came from within you.”

“Y-You’re saying I did that?” He stuttered.

“No, there’s no way,” Suzume shook, voice heavy with emotion. “He hasn’t even been near one of those Pyramids! Unlike... Well, *you*.”

“He wouldn’t need to,” Eris responded. “Splinters of Darkness exist that give to those who commune with them... So he would’ve had to be in proximity to one and given in to temptation.”

The dream. He brought his hands up to press against his faceplates. *The dream about that damn shard!*

“He’s never done anything like that!” Suzume floated above Eris.

“Obviously he has,” Eris muttered.

“She’s right,” he whispered, causing them both to look over at him. “It happened in a dream. Last night...”

“A-And you gave in to it?” Suzume asked. No judgment, just sorrow in her voice.

“No. At least I didn’t try to, I...” He put his face into his hands again. “I wasn’t thinking straight—*couldn’t* have been thinking straight! It was a dream, for Traveler’s sake...”

“Dreams reveal our truest desires,” Eris murmured.

Suzume glared. “What, are you an expert now?”

Eris narrowed her eyes. “Considering the circumstances, yes.” She paused briefly. “I’ve communicated with the Pyramids and gained Stasis... Though I wonder how you would since you both are so surprised... Maybe Drifter kept a Splinter for himself somewhere...”

A Splinter... Drifter... His dream...

The realization of what happened hit him like a Cabal gladiator. *Drifter had a Splinter in his coat last night... He’d never taken it off when they’d drunkenly climbed into bed. So somehow it came into contact with him and invaded his dreams...*

“Oh no. No, no, no,” Shiro wrapped his arms around himself, holding onto the edges of his armor to keep himself from jumping into action. *To do what, he didn’t know. He just knew he didn’t want to be here.*

“I’m back, how’s he holdin’ up?”

Shiro froze at Drifter’s voice.

“Got ya something ta eat, Shiro. Thought ya might need it after all that, I—“

Shiro shot out of his seat, launching himself at Drifter.

“Hey!” The man grunted as he was knocked to the floor, sending a small tub of treats flying. “What the *fuck* was that for?” Drifter rolled back to his feet.

“You did this to me!” He snapped.

Drifter’s anger faded to confusion. “I what?”

“Your Splinter corrupted me! The one you have!”

“Shit,” Drifter stuck his hand inside one of his pockets, pulling out a slender, dark shape. He then tilted his head up, eyes wide with guilt.

Shiro growled angrily.

“In his defense, you did have to give in to the Splinter,” Eris commented from the sidelines.

“Ok, you’re not a part of this!” He glared over at the woman before returning his focus to Drifter.

The green-cloaked man shrugged. “She’s right. You *did* give in to it.”

“Yeah, but it was a *mistake!*” Shiro snapped before taking in a deep breath. “Tell me the cure.”

“Um...” Drifter hesitated. “There is none?”

“Then tell me how to reverse this! I want nothing to do with...” He stopped mid-sentence as he noticed the Stasis crystals forming on his arms. “What’s happening,” his voice shook in

terror.

“Your stress is makin’ it come out. You gotta relax,” Drifter began to approach him slowly.

“Stay away from me,” Shiro snapped. “You *and* that splinter!”

Drifter backed away from him without protest, sliding his Splinter back into his pocket.

“Get rid of that thing,” he snapped, feeling the Stasis spreading faster across his arms. *He tried to breath. Needed to calm down...*

“I’ll keep it away from you,” Drifter murmured.

“Not good enough,” Shiro stated.

“Come on, that’s—“

“Me or the Splinter,” he blurted out, not exactly sure of the long-term consequences to this ultimatum.

Drifter didn’t say anything.

“Because if you don’t get rid of that thing, I’m leaving,” Shiro finished.

“Which kind of leavin’?” Drifter asked after a moment of hesitation.

“Both kinds.”

The green-cloaked man shook his head. “You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t. I know you don’t.”

“And why is that?” He challenged.

“Because I know you. I know you’re not afraid of this. You’re already thinking of how to weaponize Stasis.”

“Well, obviously, you don’t know me as well as you think you do,” he snapped.

Drifter placed his closed fists on his hips. “Hey, weren’t you the Guardian who used *SIVA* to forge weapons? How is Stasis any different?”

“It is *so* much different!”

“How?!”

“Stasis is *Darkness!*”

“Yeah, and Arc, Void, and Solar are Light, but we still use *them* to forge weapons...”

“Not this again...”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” Drifter snapped defensively.

“I’m done arguing about this. You know the dangers of Darkness. You know what it’s done to others in the past,” he pushed past Drifter, exiting the cockpit.

“You mean what creatures like the *Hive* have done with Darkness,” Drifter followed him out.

Shiro bit back a response.

“It’s a tool, Shiro. People like us can do good with it just like people with the Light can do bad.”

He shook his head, really fighting to answer back. *He was tired of repeating the same damn warnings to this man who would never heed them.*

“Come on, where are you even going?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“Wait, you’re actually leaving,” Drifter’s jaw fell open. “You can’t be serious!”

“Suzume, transmit my jumpship,” he ignored Drifter, which only seemed to piss him off.

“On it,” she responded.

“Hey,” Drifter snapped, reaching out to grab him.

Shiro pulled his wrist out of reach, continuing down the hall.

“Just let him go,” Eris murmured from further behind him. “This is too much for him. He needs to explore Stasis on his own time...”

Explore Stasis? Bullshit. He wasn’t doing anything with it. The first chance he got, he was going to cure himself of this disease, because that’s what it was.

“Can’t we get Elsie to help with that?! He shouldn’t be alone right now,” Drifter argued, distress in his tone.

“No...”

Both of their voices soon faded, becoming inaudible echoes once he’d reached the Derelict’s hold. Neither had followed him to try and get him to stay. Good. Because he was out of energy for arguing... for *everything* really. Though it hadn’t quite sunk in until Suzume teleported them into his jumpship and relaxed back in the comfortable seat.

“Are you okay to pilot?” She asked.

“Probably not,” he answered honestly. “Mind plugging in a destination?”

“Of course not. Where we heading to?” She flashed into view, floating just above the controls. “You know yet?” She tilted her shell back at him.

“Still deciding,” He sighed. “We obviously can’t go back to the City. Not like...” He glanced down at his arms, both of which were covered in a thin layer of Stasis. “Like *this*.”

She turned to look at him, sinking a bit in the air at the sight. “Yeah, that probably wouldn’t be good... Although, maybe we could get help. Contact Zavala or Ikora in advance?”

A good suggestion, and one he would likely need to use if he couldn’t cure himself of Stasis. “No, I still don’t want them seeing me like this.”

What would Zavala and Ikora think? Or do? Something like this was just unprecedented... *Here’s to hoping the Darkness would disqualify him from a position as Hunter Vanguard*, he thought dryly.

“It doesn’t feel right hiding,” Suzume murmured.

Shiro glanced over at her. “It doesn’t, but we don’t know enough about this yet to put others in harms way.”

Harm that he could potentially cause...

He shook himself out of his thoughts. “In the meantime, Variks is still out there. We need to bag him and bring him back for the Vanguard to deal with.”

“True,” Suzume said as she put in the coordinates. “But that does mean going to Europa...”

“We’ll stay on the surface,” he said. “Anything sinister below shouldn’t reach us with that much ice in-between.”

He hoped...

“And your Stasis?”

Shiro shivered slightly when Suzume referred to it as *his*. This power wasn’t something he wanted. It had been forced upon him!

“I’m going to try and keep my mind off of it. Hopefully it goes away, and if it doesn’t...” he didn’t finish that thought. “It reacts to my stress—my lack of control. If I stay steady it shouldn’t have as strong a grip on me.”

“Would you be able to keep calm if we ran into Drifter and Eris on Europa?” Suzume asked.

That’s right. They were going to Europa, too. The layer of crystal on his forearms shone, forcing him to take a moment to breath before they subsided again.

“We’re there only for Variks. Assuming everything goes right, we should be on and off Europa.”

Chapter 4

“Drifter’s trying to contact us again,” Suzume broke the long silence. “He wants to talk.”

“I don’t,” Shiro scowled, tightening his grip on the jumpship’s controls.

It had been roughly an hour since they’d left the Derelict behind, and although he’d cooled down enough to think rationally, he wasn’t ready to talk to anyone but his Ghost. He didn’t even know if he’d *ever* want to talk to Drifter again. As far as he was concerned, their relationship was over, both physically and platonically.

“It looks like Eris is trying to contact you, too. And there’s some unknown number...”

He shook his head, sighing in frustration. “It’s probably just Drifter again. I’m *not* talking with him.”

“No, Eris’ is coming through from different coordinates than Drifter’s, and the unknown number is in the Tangled Shore...”

So most likely Spider. Another person he had no interest communicating with.

“Do you want me to put Eris through?” Suzume asked. “It would probably be a good idea. We’re going to need a little guidance on Stasis and getting rid of it.”

He sighed. “Yeah, you’re probably right, just let me land first.”

They’d reached Europa’s upper atmosphere, beginning a free fall. Shiro angled the ship down, preparing to land in what looked like a thick blizzard. Through the storm, and the flames forming about the cockpit, he briefly caught sight of a large Fallen ketch on the other side of the moon. *Not good...*

He looked away, having to ignore it as he reversed the jumpship’s engines and began to slow their descent to Europa’s surface.

“Hm...” Suzume floated up to the window, staring out at the dark storm that surrounded them on all sides. “That’s not gonna be fun to walk through.”

“We’ll wait for it to pass,” he switched the jumpship to idle and turned on the heater. Already, Europa’s cold was taking hold of him. *Part of him wondered if it was the technology deep below the ice calling for him...*

“Alright, I’m putting Eris through now,” Suzume announced, and the woman’s voice filled the cockpit.

“Where are you?”

“Europa,” he answered curtly.

“Good,” Eris sounded relieved to hear that. “I do not advise you to return to the Tower or any place you might find Guardians in your current state.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

She paused at his tone. “I know you’re angry, Shiro. You feel betrayed, and you rightfully should... I just ask that you listen. Drifter and I are on Europa with a woman who can help you with Stasis—“

“Help in what way?” He demanded.

“*Control* it,” she answered, quickly losing her patience with him. “Like it or not, this is something *you* chose subconsciously. *You* did this to yourself, and we do not have to help you.”

He paused, taken aback by the blame she was putting on him.

“Yet we do,” Eris continued. “Because we are not oblivious to what Stasis represents. It was what nearly pushed humanity to extinction, and with the Pyramids in our system, it has a chance to do it again.”

“Using the Darkness though?” Shiro asked, voice nearly a whisper. “Isn’t that compromising yourselves for only a small chance that this works?”

“We are running out of options, Shiro,” she said gently. “Light may not be enough to stop the Darkness, but if we understand it—utilize it—we might survive... Even you know this, deep down.”

He went silent again.

“You are one of the first of what I hope is a long line of Stasis-wielding Guardians... We do not have all of the answers yet, but if you can give it a chance, we will help you... Shiro?”

"Yeah," he asked, still thinking to himself.

"It was hard for me at first," she admitted. "In a single action, I thought I was becoming the evil woman so many ignorant souls thought I was back in the City... But I wasn't. I was overcoming the Darkness that was used to take my Ghost, my eyes, and my friends. I was making it my own and you can too..." she paused. "I will leave you with this, but remember: my comms are always open. If you need to speak with me, know that your words will be safe from Drifter."

She cut communication, leaving nothing but the sounds of the swirling storm beyond the cockpit.

“That was nice of her,” he said, genuinely meaning it.

“Yeah, you don’t really think Eris would be the caring type,” Suzume agreed. “This obviously means a lot to her.”

He nodded, murmuring, “she makes me want to give this Stasis thing a chance...”

Suzume stared at him, her single blue optic bright with fear and uncertainty. “What if something goes wrong?”

“Then...” he paused, shrugging. “Then it goes wrong... She said they don’t have all the answers. She’s risking herself, too... I know Eris wouldn’t do that unless she was sure she could handle it.”

“But you’re a different story. Eris lost her Light. *You* still have it.”

He frowned. *She had a point.* “We’ll deal with everything as it happens. One step at a time.” He looked outside the cockpit. “Let’s get going. This storm’s not gonna pass, we’re gonna have to go through it.”

He glanced down at the coordinates of Variks’ last transmission. It was just under ten kilometers away. On a sparrow, they’d be there in a few minutes. That was fast but it was also a lot of time for someone to move. *Especially in low visibility like this.*

Shiro opened the cockpit, bracing as frigid wind hit him like a solid wall. He nearly cartwheeled out of his ship but managed to hold on and easily slide to the ground. Suzume tried to transmit his sparrow, but the wind took it away.

“Oops! Let’s try this again!” She re-spawned his sparrow.

This time Shiro was ready. He leapt onto the seat, grabbing the handlebars and pushing his boots into the petals. With his added weight, the sparrow didn’t instantly fly off in the storm, but still drifted. He pushed down on the pedals, shooting off in the direction of Variks’ transmission. It probably wasn’t the best decision considering the fact he couldn’t see where he was driving, but he was too desperate to get to Variks. Once he did, Cayde got justice.

There were some near misses with solid walls of ice and crevasses before Suzume broke their silence.

“I’m picking up Fallen chatter in the area.”

“Variks?” He asked.

“He’s one of them,” she answered. “There’s more Fallen arriving. For what, I don’t know...”

“We’ll just have to get there first,” Shiro said before slamming on the brakes.

Ahead of him, the silhouette of a building with a large satellite dish came into view. He had to leap off his sparrow before the wind took him away with it, though he wasn’t in the clear yet. Wind battered hard against his side, nearly knocking him off his feet, but he managed to grab the door hatch.

Shiro had been prepared to tear the door open with his Light, but something made it open. *Probably the door sensing his Exo body.* He stumbled forward, locking eyes with a Vandal hunched over a communications console.

“Hands up. All of them,” he pulled out his sidearm, pointing it straight at Variks’ head.

The Fallen released a series of surprised clicks, his body stiffening. “Shiro—?! I’m—I-It was never my intention to—“

“I said hands up!” He took a threatening step towards the Elikzni

Variks flinched, cowering over the communications console. “Y-You can’t be here...” he whispered between distressed clicks.

Shiro was about to retort when a roar from outside caught his attention. He glanced at the window, not moving his sidearm from where he had it pointed at Variks, while he searched for the source of the roar. Silhouettes of Fallen soldiers dropped from low-flying skiffs through the storm.

“Eramis,” Variks’ distressed whisper was cut off by glass shattering.

Shiro took a chance to point his sidearm away from Variks and aim it at the window instead, though his finger hesitated on the trigger at the sight of swirling blue energy. A beam of Stasis was shot through the broken glass, hitting his hands where they held his sidearm. Freezing them instantly. He stumbled backward, quickly losing mobility as the Stasis spread about his body.

“Shiro!” Suzume’s voice was filled with terror.

It was a losing battle. The beam was spreading Stasis around the entire room. He slipped on the ice, landing hard on his back. Beside him, there was an animalistic screech. He glanced over to see that Variks’ foot had been caught in the Stasis, pinning him to the floor. The Fallen flailed his arms in a desperate attempt to hook them on anything that could gain him leverage.

Shiro grunted as he tried to pull his arms free but the task proved to be impossible. *What did Eris say about focusing on Stasis? Using it to break free?* He stopped pulling against the frozen substance and took a moment to breathe. *He needed to harness it to get out... He just needed to think about Stasis. He couldn’t resist it...* But who had launched this at them in the first place? A Stasis-wielding Elikzni? *No, he couldn’t lose focus...*

“Suzume, contact Eris. Make sure she knows where we are,” he said. “Make sure Drifter knows, too.”

“I just did. They’re on their way now!”

“W-We will not survive...”

Shiro glanced at Variks. The Elikzni was trembling in fear, looking at him with clear desperation in his four eyes.

“E-Eramis’ Stasis cannot be broken...” Variks interlocked both pairs of hands in a pleading gesture. “Help Variks escape. Help Variks and Variks will help you! Will find other Guardians, will bring them here!”

Shiro narrowed his eyes.

“Please!” The Elikzni pleaded. “Variks does not lie about this! Variks wants to work with Guardians. Wants to answer for crimes, but Variks cannot if Variks is dead!”

The voices of other Elikzni grew louder and louder outside the building. *If he was going to make a decision, it had to be now...*

Shiro stared at his own body that was partially frozen solid before glancing up at Variks who was only caught by his foot. As much as he hates to admit it, it made more sense for him to free Variks. *Though that was relying entirely on him, a murderer and traitor to the Awoken, keeping his word...*

Still his best shot.

“Take my knife,” he crawled across the ice to reach Variks, turning so the sheathe on his belt was facing him. “You better come back.”

“Variks will!” The Elikzni struggled to get the sheathe open and pull the knife out.

For a moment, Variks stared at the knife before plunging it straight into his ankle. Shiro flinched at the sound of a thin outer shell cracking and the ear-splitting screech Variks let out.

Variks kept cutting, spilling blue blood that didn’t stop while he twisted his leg, snapping the bone, and pulling himself free of the ice. With one final glance in his direction, Variks skittered away on five limbs, keeping the knife held tightly in his fist.

Shiro didn’t have more than a moment to stare after the Elikzni scribe before the others reached the building. He turned around as best as he could on the slippery surface, staring down the Elikzni as they entered. The first had dark armor and a fan of crystals that spread out from the back of her neck and shoulders. The two flanking her were a smooth-helmeted male and another female with a two-pronged helmet.

“Hm... Seems as though I cast my line only to pull in the wrong prey,” the lead Elikzni’s voice came out cold. “You were the last creature I was expecting to find on this moon.”

Shiro wasn’t too surprised that she was speaking perfect English. *It seemed as though every alien race had their claws on a translator nowadays...*

“M-Maybe not the last, Eramiskel,” beside her the smaller Elikzni with no horns on his rounded helmet spoke up, speaking quickly. “Look! He is one of the machines! O-One from the buildings!”

The lead Elikzni, Eramiskel, looked over his trapped body with her icy blue eyes before angling them back up to meet Shiro’s. “This one is not from those labs. I know a Lightbearer when I see one.”

The male Elikzni cocked his head, looking back at Shiro. “But the designs, it’s—“

“Enough of this arguing!” A different Elikśni—the other female—hit the male on the back of his helmet. “If Eramiskel says it is not from here then it isn’t!” She looked to her leader. “What do you want me to do with it, my Kell?”

Eramiskel thought for a moment before a twinkle came to her eyes. “Take it to Riis-Reborn. I will speak more to it there.” She turned, leaving him with the other generals.

The large female with the two-pronged helmet stepped up to him, a laugh in her growling voice. Shiro pushed himself up to his feet, but there was no way for him to defend himself. The Elikśni wrapped her fist around his neck, lifting him off the ground before crushing his spinal strut.

Chapter 5

The warm sensation of revival was cut short by his own memories flooding back to him. He tried to brace himself in preparation to fight, but found that he couldn't move. He'd been refrozen from the neck down into a standing position and set in front of the Kell, Eramis, and the smooth-helmed male.

"Praksis. Put her back in the cage," Eramis ordered.

"No!" Suzume's voice shrieked.

Shiro renewed his struggling when he saw Eramis pass a partially frozen Suzume to the claws of the smaller male, Praksis.

"Let her go!" He demanded, but it went unheard. Praksis roughly shoved Suzume into the device he held, activating the energy barriers that would keep her contained.

"You said you wouldn't separate us!" Suzume cried out. "You said if I revived him you wouldn't separate us!"

Eramis glared down into the cage before lifting her gaze to the other Eliknsi. "Put her away."

"Yes, Eramiskel," Praksis bowed his head low before turning to exit.

"And Praksis?" Eramis called before the smaller male could disappear from the room.

"Y-Yes, my Kell?" Praksis immediately turned back around to face her.

"No experimenting with the Ghost."

Praksis's crimson eyes flashed with disappointment but he bowed his head again. "Yes, Eramiskel. She will remain intact."

"No! Please," Suzume wailed, her voice fading as Praksis took her out of the room. "You can't do this! Please don't do this! I did what you wanted! I revived him! Don't take him away from me!"

He glared at Eramis. "If anything happens to her—"

"You'll *what*? You have no power against me..." She paused, taking in the meaning of her own words. "How does that feel? To have your Light fail you? To have your Traveler fail you?"

He chose not to respond.

This only seemed to anger the Kell, but she kept her voice cold and even. "Any predecessor of mine would start a tirade about how you stole our 'Great Machine.' Not me. I've got bigger things to attend to."

She grabbed his frozen form and began dragging him to the huge window overlooking a mess of metal and tarps. “Look. It’s a city. The first to be established by Elikśni in your system.”

Shiro analyzed it, watching the movement from between the tarps. Already, he could estimate thousands of Elikśni here... but that was just what was *visible*.

“Riis-Reborn. Impressive, isn’t it?” Eramis asked, waiting for a response.

“Doesn’t really compete with *my* City,” he commented.

Eramis glared hateful daggers at him but didn’t drop her even tone. “Those who were formerly aligned with Kell’s Scourge would say otherwise... The district they were in looks terrible...”

Shiro opened his mouth in a response just to close it again. He wasn’t going to let her egg him on.

She noticed it anyway. “It must sting to have the Elikśni—my formerly broken people—break yours apart. Even more so since you used to hunt us like animals.”

“Your people hunted Guardians, too,” he snapped. “Andal Brask had a bounty on his head til the day he died.”

Cayde even did...

“Which was much deserved. He made the orders that murdered those who would lead my people out of the abyss we’d fallen into,” Eramis continued. “Irony. Considering the political state of your City. Soon enough, the Guardians will be the ‘pirates’, not the Elikśni.”

Shiro briefly thought of the Vanguard and Gambit, Drifter and himself... *Light and Dark*.

“At every turn you Lightbearers are split,” Eramis’ eyes narrowed. “You’re growing weaker as we grow stronger. Take another look at my city.”

Shiro kept his eyes on Eramis.

“Down there, everyone is united. No Baron schemes against their neighbors and no Dreg schemes against their Kell. Look!”

He refused.

“Fine. Don’t,” she growled, turning to exit the room with her cloak flaring out behind her. “I will just leave you here... give you time to *think* about the threat Riis-Reborn has become.”

— —

Eramis stayed true to her word about leaving him here. He'd been alone for countless hours, only able to watch the sun slowly cross the sky or the Eliknsi of Riis-Reborn. Even though he'd refused before, he couldn't help himself from analyzing what he could see to give him something, *anything*, to do.

Shiro thought about what Eramis had said about the unity of House Salvation and how they were growing stronger. She probably had a lot to do with that which was one of the reasons he was currently alone in her office.

It was another unreasonably long time before he'd heard footsteps outside the room. Part of him was tense, though it was mostly at how uncomfortable the Stasis around his body made him. Mostly, he found himself slightly relieved at the thought that Eramis was coming back. *He was losing his mind in here...* Unfortunately it was only a Dreg. This Dreg carried a duster and made a quick round around Eramis' office before leaving without a word.

Once again, he was left in absolute silence.

Day slowly turned to night. He tried to estimate how many Earth days had passed in the meantime. If Suzume were here, she'd know the answer but they could've taken her anywhere... *Praksis* could've taken her anywhere...

Another cleaning Dreg came and went without a word. Shiro knew this was all Eramis. She was doing this to exhaust him but he wasn't falling for it. He closed his eyes, resting as much as he could in the standing position he was frozen in.

Yet another cleaning Dreg. Shiro had woken up from his half-sleep when it opened the door. He didn't turn to look, closing his eyes again to get the most out of the night. This Dreg would be gone soon. *At least he'd thought it would be...*

Footsteps approached him slowly and he was immediately put on high alert.

Shiro twisted his neck as much as the ice would allow, finding a silhouette of not a Dreg, but a Vandal, standing in the center of the office. He instantly stiffened—all he could do in his position—before he noticed the Vandal was missing a foot.

“Variks?!”

The Eliknsi clicked at him in a hushing manner as he limped towards him.

“I can't believe you actually came back.”

“Variks is sorry. It took long time to lose Salvation's scent... then to find you,” Variks removed a communicator from his bleach-white robes and began to mess with it.

“Better late than never,” Shiro watched him work the device, mostly forgetting how angry he was at the Eliknsi for his part in Cayde's murder. “I seriously thought I was on my own.”

“Variks is risking much to be here, but Variks promised,” the Eliknsi lifted the communicator to him.

Shiro flinched when Variks pressed it against the side of his head. “Hey, what are you—“

“Babe!” Drifter’s voice came through the communicator. “I’ve been so damn worried about you!”

“Drifter—“

“Don’t you worry. I’m circling the outskirts of Salvation territory. Variks is gonna break you free and get you outta there. You’ll be on the Derelict in no time!”

Variks took a knife—his knife—out from where it’d been stored in his robes, and began to chip at the Stasis.

“Wait, no! We can’t go yet!”

Variks stopped chipping at the Stasis.

“Why not?” Drifter asked.

“Suzume’s not with me!”

“Fuck...” Drifter groaned. “Where they take her?”

“You think I know?!”

“It’d make our jobs a whole hell of a lot easier if you did!”

“Well, I don’t!”

“Please, no arguing,” Variks cut in. “We are running out of time.”

“I’m not leaving without her,” he stated.

“Shiro—“ Drifter protested.

“If I leave, they’ll kill her.”

“But we may never get a chance like this to break you out! What if they kill *you*?”

“Wouldn’t matter,” he frowned. “Suzume and I are dead either way.”

“Eris!” Drifter’s voice got quieter as he called through the Derelict. “Get over here and talk to him!”

There was shuffling on the other end. Shiro felt the growl of a response forming in the back of his throat as he waited. There was muffled arguing between Drifter and Eris with an entire minute going by without either of them taking the communicator.

Variks was getting jumpier. He was obviously anxious about how long he was spending in Eramis’ office.

“Get out of here,” he whispered to him.

Variks met his eyes. Something changed in those bright blue, fearful orbs. They looked determined. “No. Variks will see what he can do for you.”

Shiro watched the Elikśni contemplate on whether or not to leave the communicator with him before tucking it back into his robes. “Y-You’re going to try to find Suzume?”

The Elikśni gave an affirmative click. “Will not return without her,” he said before leaving the office and hurrying away with limping footsteps.

The footsteps eventually faded and Shiro was alone in the dark again. He sighed, continuing his routine of rest until he couldn’t.

The sun was rising again, sending blades of light through the window. He was forced to avert his eyes downward and watch the buzzing city below him. It had already been ages since Variks had left him and he wondered if the Elikśni was down there. *Or maybe his hope of rescue had been killed...*

Being alone with his thoughts wasn’t fun.

Footsteps caught his attention. Once again, he was on high alert, though a small part of him hoped this was Variks returning with Suzume. If he had her, they’d be able to get out of here.

“Eramiskel, please...”

He stiffened at the scraggly voice. *Praksis...*

“Please, you must let me experiment before we simply give them away! Imagine the possibilities!”

“I can imagine,” Eramis’ cold voice sounded. “Losing potential allies.”

“At least let me experiment with the Exo! There’s no live specimens in any of those facilities,” Praksis whined.

“No.”

“I wouldn’t do anything that the Ghost couldn’t repair!”

“I said *no*, Praksis,” Eramis growled.

“I—s-sorry, my Kell, I understand.”

The two Elikśni entered the office. Eramis lead the way, walking straight up to him, condescension in her eyes. “How was your sol?” She asked.

He didn’t answer.

“I hope you’ve had plenty of time to think,” she said, approaching the window and staring down at Riis-Reborn. Then she glanced at him. “I hope you won’t miss my city. I’m sending you elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere?” He finally asked.

“Yes,” her eyes had a smirk in them. “I figured I could use you to make an alliance. There’s someone out there who really wants to get you back.”

Was it Drifter?

Several Captains entered the office and lifted his frozen form off the ground. He glared over his shoulder at Eramis as the Captains took him out of the room, but Eramis was seated on her throne with her back to him. Praksis was standing beside her though his eyes were on him, giving a gesture that mocked a wave.

— —

“Suzume!” Shiro stiffened in his icy prison when a Dreg carried her cage into the cargo hold of the Skiff and placed her beside him.

“Thank the Traveler you’re alright!” She struggled to remain floating with the Stasis crystals still on her shell. “She didn’t do anything, did she?”

“No, she left me alone. *Literally*. What did they do to you?”

“Nothing. They only stared,” she answered. “I was so scared... about you.”

The Skiff took off into hyperspace. They’d be at their destination in minutes, wherever that would be. *Definitely not with Drifter...* It was kind of hard to believe he was disappointed about that considering their previous argument.

“I’m fine,” he assured her. “Eramis legitimately left me in a room by myself and...” he lowered his voice. “Variks came back.”

“He did?” Suzume perked up.

“Yes. Variks is in contact with Drifter and Eris, too. He was actually trying to find you for me when... well, Eramis sent us both away...”

“Do you think he knows where we are?”

The ship’s hull harshly vibrated. A sign they’d come out of hyperspace and reached their destination.

— —

“I was under the impression that your kind considered it rude not to follow through on agreements. Seems I was wrong.”

Shiro was in the center of Spider’s Lair—alone and still frozen. He and Suzume had been separated immediately, though she’d noticed something about the cage she was in: it was running out of batteries and Spider’s associates didn’t have replacements.

Suzume would be free in four hours. Once she was, there was nothing keeping either of them here.

“I’m not going to apologize for leaving,” he snapped at the mob boss.

Spider let out a dark chuckle at his words but didn’t respond. He only stared at his frozen form, with a smirk in his eyes.

“I had my reasons,” Shiro added, not mentioning the fact that he’d essentially been left for dead when the Scorn had attacked Spider’s Palace.

“I’m sure you did,” Spider’s mandibles clicked underneath his mask. “The guilty ones always do...”

Shiro rolled his eyes, wanting so badly to break out of his Stasis prison and show this con artist what happened when you messed with a Hunter. Unfortunately, that wasn’t going to happen. Not when the Stasis crystals were suppressing his Light.

“Alas, you have much to repay. Much *more* than you did initially. A pity. You should’ve just stayed with me...”

“I’m not giving you anything,” Shiro snapped.

Spider chuckled again. “You’ve lost the right to ‘give’ me what was promised, be it time or Glimmer. Now, I’ll take what I want so I know that I’ll *get it!*”

“Oh yeah? I can’t really do anything until you get me out of this Stasis, and once you do, I’m gone.”

“No you’re not,” Spider growled. “I’ve made some... *alterations* when working with disloyal Lightbearers such as yourself. Now I...” Spider laughed. “I’ll let you find out on your own. *Crow!* Get in here! I’ve got a present for you...”

Shiro turned his head to watch a cloaked man enter the room. His head was lowered submissively, but when he raised it, his golden eyes sent a chill through Shiro’s spine.

“*Uldren?!*”

The Awoken man flinched at the harsh tone in his voice, immediately snapping his head around as if to locate who Shiro had been referring to. He then turned back around, a look of confusion in his wide eyes.

Was that a joke?! Shiro struggled harder against the Stasis he was trapped in, “You’re dead!”

“No name-calling!” Spider snapped at him. “Unless you want me to crush your Ghost!”

Shiro shut his mouth though he was seething with confused rage. *How was Uldren alive?! He’d seen the reports!*

“What do you want me to do with him, Baron?” The Awoken asked.

“Whatever you’d like,” Spider chuckled darkly. “Just make sure you *eventually* get him out of that ice, alright?”

“Crow” nodded, giving him a hesitant look.

“Have fun,” Spider rumbled out a laugh. “But not too much.”

Chapter 6

The Awoken man half-carried/half-dragged him out of Spider's chamber without a word.

Shiro didn't speak either. He was still caught up on Spider's threat of crushing Suzume. Spider didn't do empty threats. If he said something wrong around Crow there would obviously be consequences. Behind them, one of Spider's close associates, Avrok, followed—no doubt under Spider's orders.

It wasn't really a surprise that he was going to be watched at all times...

"Who is 'Uldren'?" Crow asked once he'd dragged his frozen form into the privacy of what looked like his personal quarters. "I um... I get compared to them a lot and I was just wondering..."

Shiro didn't answer right away—or notice the low growl in Avrok's throat. He was still taking in the Awoken's quarters. When he noticed the Ghost floating in the corner, waiting for them, his anger with Crow cooled. *Crow really wasn't Uldren... At least not anymore...*

The Ghost's optic widened in shock when it spotted him.

"Hi, Glint," Crow greeted, not having noticed his Ghost's surprise.

Glint glanced from him to Crow, looking nervous. "Hey, do you mind if I had a moment alone with our new friend?"

Crow gave Glint a quick nod and turned to leave, passing Avrok on the way out who hadn't moved from where he stood.

"Can we speak alone. Please?" Glint asked Avrok.

After a moment of contemplation, the Elikśni turned and exited the room. Once the door closed behind him, Shiro was quick to speak first—snapping at the Ghost. "How could you? How?!"

"It felt right," Glint answered.

"But *how*? After everything Uldren has done! After he *murdered* Cayde! How could you bring him back?"

"Because he's not Uldren. He's *Crow*."

Shiro's fists clenched within the ice. "I don't care! He's the spitting image of Uldren and you know that!"

Glint lowered his gaze to the floor. "I'm sorry..."

"I don't think you are!"

"I *am*. Every day I am," Glint slowly met his eyes again. "Please just remember he's not Uldren. Blame me. Blame me for everything, but don't blame him..."

Shiro frowned with a sigh. "As much as I want to blame him, I can't," he shook his head, "fuck! Fuck you for doing this!"

Glint pulled his shell in tightly. "I'm sorry..."

The door to the chamber opened and Crow and Avrok entered. Shiro went back to being silent, watching carefully as Crow approached him and Avrok took a seat near the fall wall to supervise.

"I'm going to try to burn away the Stasis with my Light," Crow said, sounding nervously. "Do you want your arms free? I could go for them first but you can't attack me..."

The thought of gaining Crow's trust just to retaliate once he was free crossed Shiro's mind, but he stopped that thought at Avrok's watchful eyes paired with the fact Crow was oblivious to what his former self had done.

"Get my arms first," he murmured.

Crow nodded and got closer, lifting his hands to his left arm. A dull orange glow began to radiate from the Awoken's hands.

"I'm sorry in advance if I hurt you," Crow averted his eyes as he spoke. "I don't have much practice with the Light..."

"Spider doesn't allow it?" He asked.

"No... Just no teachers..."

There was silence for a long while after that. Neither of them knew what to say. In the silence, Crow managed to get Shiro's left arm free and he began to stretch out the stiff joints as Crow began on his other arm.

"I could teach you if you want," Shiro offered before really thinking about it.

"You would?" Crow looked up, a twinkle of excitement in his golden eyes that he quickly blinked away, glancing at Avrok. "I-I would be honored, um... If that is okay, of course."

The Elikśni's eyes narrowed in thought. "You ask Spider about that," he finally said.

"Okay," Crow nodded, that excited twinkle coming back to his eyes as he focused on getting Shiro's right arm free. He burnt it in a few places, but Shiro didn't bother pointing it out. He just watched as Crow worked. The New Light was so unconfident in his abilities.

Shiro was already thinking about things he could teach Crow, but before any of that could happen, he needed to get him out of here. *Not too difficult. He'd already done it once...*

At some point, Avrok had left them alone. Shiro hadn't seen the Elikśni leave, though he wasn't about to assume they were in the clear. It was likely that Avrok was watching from a hidden device or at least listening from another room. Escape would have to be discussed some other time. *Hopefully when he knew where Suzume was..*

"I... I think that might be all I can do for now," Crow was visibly exhausted, having to use a chunk of Stasis on Shiro's frozen hip to pull himself up.

"You did great," Glint appeared beside Crow to congratulate him.

"Thanks," Crow glanced up at the Ghost, his troubled look remaining. "But I probably could've done more..."

"It's fine. Honestly," Shiro shrugged his freed shoulders. "It's more than enough to have some movement back."

"Thanks..." Crow still frowned. "I'll get the rest in the morning. The moment I wake up. I promise."

Shiro just nodded, watching as the troubled expression on Crow's face grow into nervousness. *What was bothering him now?*

"Um... Let me get you to the bed, I, um... You can have it. I'll sleep elsewhere," Crow reached for his hand.

Shiro grabbed his hand, letting Crow drag him and his frozen lower half across the floor. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Crow nodded immediately.

"Because I'm really not that tired."

A lie. He was just as exhausted—if not more—than Crow was. Staying awake in freezing Stasis and an uncomfortable position had him beat.

"Yeah, I'm sure. It'll probably still be good to get off your feet... I think? Um..." Crow awkwardly stood by, trying to offer help but flinching away at each close contact to his body, while Shiro hauled his lower body onto the bed. "Okay, good... I, um... I'll be close by if you need anything."

Crow grabbed at an Elikśni tarp hanging on the wall and pulled it down. He then spread it out on the floor away from Shiro, shifting on top of the tarp as he tried to get comfortable. Shiro watched him out of the corner of his eye. Eventually the Awoken man settled down and fell asleep, but Shiro was still wide awake. He was thinking... about everything, really. About Cayde. Uldren... how he even got himself wrapped up in all of this in the first place...

Drifter: Why was the answer always Drifter?

— —
“Shiro, wake up,” a voice whispered. “Shiro.”

He blinked open his eyes, immediately tense and ready to fight at the sight of Uldren Sov—
No. Not Uldren. This was Crow.

“You’re awake,” Crow looked relieved

“Was I out for long?” Shiro asked as he pushed himself to sit up, stopping when he felt something different... He glanced down at himself, nearly doing a double take when he saw that his lower half was unfrozen.

“I-I’m sorry,” Crow’s voice shook. “I didn’t want to do it while you were asleep and unaware, but I’ve been unable to wake you. Spider called...”

“For what?”

“For *you*,” Crow answered. “He wanted me to have you freed from the Stasis so he could speak with you in his Lair...”

“For what?” Shiro repeated, standing up from the bed. His legs were a little wobbly after being in Stasis for so long, but he held a hand up to stop Crow from helping him.

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t tell me,” Crow said. “He doesn’t even want me in there.”

Then it probably had something to do with who Crow once was... and other things...

“Maybe I could go, too. Maybe he’s changed his mind?” Crow asked.

“Knowing Spider, I doubt that,” Shiro walked across Crow’s quarters to the door. It opened and he tensed when he saw Avrok waiting on the other side.

“Avrok, can you—“ Crow began.

“Stay here,” the Elikśni ordered, having heard everything through the door.

Crow opened his mouth as though to argue but obeyed.

“Follow me,” Avrok turned his gaze to Shiro.

Shiro gave Crow one last glance before he left to walk beside the Elikśni. He contemplated on whether to try and speak to him or not. He *knew* Avrok from his time serving Spider, and although they hadn’t been friends or anything close to that, Shiro had still saved his life. Surely that counted for something?

“I can find my way back, you know?”

The ever-watchful Avrok didn’t even look at him. “Yes, but you cannot be trusted.”

“Oh, come on,” he snapped. “You all practically left me to the Scorn. Why wouldn’t I leave?”

“Because loyalty,” Avrok kept his eyes forward. “You owed Spider so you should’ve gone back to him... He even called to make sure you were alive,” the Eliknsni glanced at him. “That is more than he would’ve done for the rest of us. For me.”

Shiro wanted to argue that *he’d* been the one to call Spider, and that if he’d decided to come back, he would’ve had an unfair amount of debt added to what he already owed, though he just stayed quiet.

“Ah, Shiro... Avrok tells me you’re getting along with my little bird,” Spider said as they entered.

Shiro stepped up to the mob boss, glaring up at him. “I guess I am.”

“You’re a smart man to do so,” Spider rumbled, his voice calm but with a threatening growl hidden underneath it. “My bird is fairly... *fragile*, so to speak... You need to be careful around him.”

He’d figured that much out himself... “Anything else?”

Spider stared at him for a moment, his eyes cold. “There is, actually. Your Ghost...”

“What about her?”

Spider laughed.

“What did you do to her?!” He snapped.

There was a smirk in the Eliknsni’s optics. “Oh, we would never *do* anything to her... She did this all herself...”

“What happened,” Shiro could hardly keep his voice under control.

Spider let a moment of awful silence pass before continuing. “Some of my associates were trying to... *move* her... She slipped from their claws and disappeared.”

Shiro didn’t react on the outside, but inside, he was bubbling with glee. *Suzume had escaped!*

“Any idea where she went?”

“No,” he answered honestly. “She hasn’t made contact with me.”

Probably for the best. Crow had been with him all last night and Avrok had been watching him closely. Eliknsni are crafty. Even if she was hidden from view, they probably know of a dozen ways to find and trap her.

“Oh, she hasn’t?” Spider mocked concern before his eyes narrowed. “Why do I have a hard time believing that?”

“Because you don’t want to.”

“Trust me,” Spider snarled. “I *want* to believe that the Guardian who disrupted my Shore would pay back his debts proper—“

“I already have. In fact, I’ve given you much more than you deserve out of me.”

"You don't get to decide."

"So how are you going to keep me here?" Shiro asked. "You just told me that Suzume escaped, so you have nothing. I could walk out right now and none of you could stop me."

The Elikśni guards on either side of Spider lifted their Arc-charged spears, growling at him.

"Beat me, stab me, *kill* me even. Suzume won’t take the bait." *Hopefully not like with Eramis...*

Spider remained silent, watching him as if he'd been considering those options. "You’re right. I cannot force you to stay..." He clicked his jaws. Displeased. "Though I thought I’d attempt to... well, *tempt* you into staying..."

Shiro frowned. “And why would I do that?”

“For starters, *I* was the one who got you out of Eramis’ claws... You also have no ship to leave my Shore and no one would lend one to someone in such bad standings with me...”

“That sounds a lot more like blackmail than *tempting*,” Shiro commented.

“Or you can leave, meet up with your Ghost, and find your way off my Shore,” Spider growled. “Knowing that you’ll be leaving Crow here...”

Shiro’s excitement quickly faded. *Of course... Just more games...*

A smirk returned to Spider’s eyes. “Avrok informed me of your conversation with him... Apparently Crow is very excited to receive training from an *actual* Lightbearer...”

Damn it...

“Still want to leave knowing you’ll be leaving him behind?” Spider asked with a low chuckle. “He’ll be very upset. Very lonely...”

“He has the face of my friend’s murderer,” Shiro stated, though instead of the Awoken Prince’s harsh expression, he could only see one of innocence, of fear...

“Oh, but you know he’s not the same. I know you do...” Spider said. “He’s a Lightbearer just like you. You’re not going to leave him here...”

Shiro looked down, contemplating. *He really couldn’t leave Crow here to be influenced by Spider... but at the same time, there was nowhere he could take Crow... Spider had to know this. He had to just be trying to convince him to stay just to he could trap him here...*

He'd have to be stupid to fall for it, but he couldn't just leave Crow here. *Damnit...*

— —

Avrok led him back to Crow's quarters.

Crow was sitting on his bed crosslegged, speaking with Glint. When they entered, the tiny smile on Crow's face faded and his eyes filled with concern.

"He is not to leave this room without you," Avrok told Crow before turning to leave.

Shiro glared at the Elikśni until the door closed behind him.

"Did he hurt you?"

Shiro glanced at the Awoken. "Who?"

"Spider..." Crow's voice was barely above a whisper. "Did he do anything."

"No. We just talked."

"About what?" Crow asked, standing up from his bed.

"About your training."

Chapter 7

Staying on the Shore was a terrible idea, but Shiro didn't have much of a choice. Spider *wanted* him to take the opportunity to leave, that much was obvious. *He wouldn't have told him Suzume had escaped otherwise.* That meant the mob boss definitely had a plan, one that likely involved some sort of suppression device to snare Suzume the moment she thought it was safe enough to come out of hiding. So like it or not, staying was the better option.

Where would he go anyway? Back to the Tower, Zavala, and all the questions about Hunter Vanguard? *Definitely not without this Stasis thing figured out.* Back to Drifter, Eris, and whatever they were doing on Europa? *That, he wasn't sure about either..*

"I never go this far," Crow was visibly struggling to keep in-step with the fast pace Shiro had set. "Spider doesn't like it..."

"He'll probably appreciate the distance once you start using your Light," he commented. "It can get messy."

Crow nodded, continuing to follow him through the rough terrain.

Unbeknownst to Crow, they wouldn't be training today. Shiro knew the location of a Guardian outpost still in operations from his time under Spider. If Suzume was anywhere, she'd be there. They'd be able to talk freely, inform the outpost of his and Crow's situation, and hitch a ride back to the City, all without Spider knowing.

Training in the City beneath the likes of Lord Shaxx would be much better for Crow than out here in this wasteland...

"I'm sorry, but can we stop for a minute?" Crow asked.

"Out of breath already?" He joked.

"Kinda, but..." Crow hesitated. "I don't know. I just don't like going this far out."

"Why not?" Shiro asked as he pulled himself to the top of the asteroid's peak.

"I've been killed here before..."

Shiro glanced down at Crow who'd just pulled himself up atop the asteroid, too. The Awoken stared down at the Guardian outpost, fear in his eyes.

"By Lightbearers I'm assuming."

Crow nodded.

Of course it would be... In their defense, he probably would've done the same if he saw what he thought was Uldren. He'd be much too angry to investigate... Shiro sighed. "Not all of them will be like that. Once they recognize you as one of their own, they'll warm up."

“You really think so?”

He hoped so. "Let me just talk to them first and we'll see."

“I really don't want to go over there...”

“You don't have to yet. Once I talk to them, they're going to help with your training.” *It technically wasn't a lie.*

Crow released a quiet hum, his eyes still on the outpost. "What should I do then?"

"Just stay here until I come back for you, okay?" He said, standing up on the asteroid to leave, though he found himself hesitating.

Crow glanced at him. "You are coming back... Right?"

“I am,” he promised. “But until I do, you have to stay hidden. No one can know you're here.”

“Okay,” Crow shifted so he could lay prone on the surface and would be indistinguishable in the distance.

“That includes Spider.”

Crow looked up, golden eyes nervous. “What if he calls?”

“Then you don't answer,” he said, glancing over at Glint who was floating above Crow's shoulder. “And you don't let him answer.”

“That might not be the best idea,” Glint's shell twitched.

“Yeah... Spider will be angry if I don't respond...” Crow whispered.

Shiro kept his voice even despite the fact he was growing frustrated at Crow's naïveté. “Then if you must, tell him we're training. He just can't find out we're *here*. You told me yourself that he doesn't like you going out this far.”

Crow nodded.

“I'll be back soon,” Shiro began to climb down the rough surface of the asteroid.

“It's not going to be easy...”

Shiro glanced up to see Glint staring at him. “What's not?” He asked.

“*This...*” the Ghost's optic flicked from Crow to the Guardian outpost. “It's not going to be easy...”

Bringing Crow to the outpost... That's what Glint meant...

“I know it won't be, but I'm going to figure it out.”

— —

Shiro circled around the outpost before he entered, checking for any of Spider's minions and making sure he couldn't see Crow from any angle before entering.

Inside, there was a lack of activity. This place would've been swarming not too long ago, but now the only reason he knew it hadn't been abandoned was because an Awoken woman with short, pink hair and an eyepatch was walking his way.

"I thought I recognized you," she smiled.

"Petra Venj?" He blinked. "Definitely wasn't expecting to see you here. Isn't everything still happening in the Dreaming City?"

"With no end in sight," Petra answered, her face solemn. "I've been—"

A flash of light between them cut her off. "So sorry to interrupt, Petra, but it's been two days since I've talked freely with my Guardian!"

"Go right ahead," Petra nodded.

"Shiro!" She circled around him, her shell swirling behind her in a motion that made it look like she was swimming through the air. "I'm so happy I can talk with you now! I wanted to let you know I was there with you the whole time but I couldn't reveal myself with—" Suzume glanced at Petra nervously.

Did Petra even know about Crow? Probably wouldn't be smart to mention him before he knew for sure...

"Spider," Shiro answered Petra's confused look. "Spider's been keeping us."

"Again?" She asked. "On what terms?"

"The same ones," he shrugged. "He never got over me leaving."

"When does he ever?" She rolled her eye with a frown. "I could probably talk with him about letting you go."

"No need," Suzume buzzed to Petra's side. "We're out now and he has no way of getting us back!"

"Well, it's a little more complicated than that..." he trailed off.

Suzume turned to him, her shell angled in displeasure. She knew what he was planning.

"Complicated in what ways?" Petra asked.

He hesitated. "I'll just say that it involves smuggling something out of Spider's possession. Something *classified*."

"Oh," she nodded, "makes sense if you're on the case, then. Anything you need while you're here?"

"Just a second to ourselves," he gestured to Suzume who was still glaring at him. "There's some people we've got to contact."

Petra gave them both a nod before heading to a connected room. Once the door closed and Petra's footsteps faded, Suzume turned to him. "No."

"No?" He repeated.

"Yes 'no.' You want to go back for Uldren and my answer is 'no.'"

Suzume's use of the former Awoken Prince's name made him uncomfortable. "We shouldn't leave him here..."

"Probably not, but... I just can't bear to see his face. I mean, I'm a Ghost, so I should be more understanding of his situation, but I just can't..." Suzume slumped. "Sundance was my friend long before she found Cayde and I found you... It's because of him that they're both gone and I can't forget that."

Shiro glanced away.

"I don't mean this to be mean, but I think you're getting too involved with this..." She floated to the side to meet his eyes. "We need to leave."

"Yeah, but..." He cut himself off again. Part of him knew Suzume was right. He *was* getting too involved... but the other part knew that Crow might not get a chance like this. He needed to get him out of here.

"Where would we even put him?"

"We could probably sort something out."

"There's checkpoints at every hangar," Suzume pointed out.

"So we get Amanda's help. Pass inspection that way."

"Then what? We can't keep him a secret for long. At some point Zavala *will* find out and we'll just be bringing him from one miserable situation to another. Why would we want to do that?"

Shiro sighed. "I don't know, okay..." he shook his head as he thought. "I guess I was just looking for an ally in there and he fit the most marks..."

Was he thinking straight? Probably not after everything that's happened...

“We could still help him if that’s what you want. I’d just rather have us do it from inside the City’s walls.” She paused, softening her voice. “It’s been two years since Uldren’s death. That’s a long time for Spider to have kept him hidden. He’ll be safe here until we figure something out... What if he doesn’t even want to leave?”

Shiro frowned at her. “He’s all jumpy and uncomfortable, of course he wants to leave. Hell, he probably doesn’t even know how to express it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right...” Suzume sighed, glancing up at him. “Is there any way I can convince you not to go back?”

“No, sorry,” he gave her a smirk.

She released another sigh, though there was a little humor in it. “Can I at least contact Drifter? He has a ship and could probably get us and Crow out of here.”

The smirk faded from his face. “How about Amanda instead?”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Suzume commented.

“Yeah, don’t need to be told that again.”

They passed Petra on their way out. The Awoken women looked her way as if she wanted to ask him about something but simply watched them leave.

— —

Crow was right where he’d left him. The New Light jumped to his feet when he approached, looking relieved to see him. “What did they say?”

“Nothing. There weren’t any Lightbearers,” he said. Wasn’t a lie.

“Oh,” Crow frowned, falling into step beside him as they walked back to Spider’s Lair. “So who was there?”

“Just some woman,” he decided.

Crow paused for a moment, something flashing in his eyes. “Was she Awoken?”

Shiro hesitated. “Yes.”

“There’s an Awoken woman who follows me on the Shore...” Crow glanced behind them. “I wonder if that was her...”

Yeah, it definitely was a good idea he didn’t tell Petra about Crow.

— —

Shiro stood before Spider, Avrok standing beside him with a low growl in his throat.

“You took my bird a little too far.”

How do you know that? I was scanning the horizon the entire time, Shiro wanted to say, but knew the answer.

Crow. Crow told him. *Even after he'd said not to.*

“I want you *training* him not taking him on some field trip,” Spider scolded.

“I was taking him to find a clear spot. We didn't have much luck,” Shiro explained.

Spider let out a dark chuckle. “That's almost funny... Except I know you were at that Guardian post.”

“Won't happen again.”

“Yes, it won't, because I'm cutting my loses with you.”

Shiro blinked, not understanding Spider's meaning at first. “What?”

“Go get our guest,” Spider looked to Avrok.

The Elikśni nodded, turning to leave. A moment later, he returned with a green-robed man who had a large smile on his face.

“Hey, Babe, was wonderin' where ya headed off to!”

Shiro turned back to Spider, ignoring Drifter for as long as he could. “What about my debt?”

“Doesn't matter. I've got all that I'll ever need with my little bird.” The mob boss lifted his head to Drifter, grumbling. “Your 'man' has given me much more trouble than he's worth...”

Drifter laughed. “That's why I love 'im so much!”

Drifter threw an arm over his shoulders. Shiro threw a glare at him but he didn't seem to get the do-not-touch-me hint.

“As you've told me... too many times,” Spider growled. “Just take him and get off my Shore. I've had enough of foreign relations for one day...”

“Will do,” Drifter winked.

Spider's only answer was an annoyed click.

Shiro was quick to pull out of Drifter's grip, walking with quick strides out of Spider's Lair. Drifter followed him, having to run to catch up.

"Hey, where ya goin' so fast?"

Shiro continued to ignore him. "Suzume, I told you to contact *Amanda* not *Drifter*."

"I definitely didn't bring him here! He showed up himself!"

"Damn right, 'he' showed up," Drifter caught up, grabbing a hold of his arm. "Geez, after all the favors I pulled, ya can't even pretend ta be happy ta see me?"

Shiro glared. "Why would I? You're the reason all this shit's happening to me!"

"Least I'm tryin' ta get ya out've it!"

"Oh please, like that makes a difference," he dragged Drifter through the hall as he tried to pull him to a stop.

"Don't it?"

"Not when you've never been sorry for it. Let go!"

To his surprise, Drifter let go, but he still followed close to his side. "Come on, can you just relax? Let me take you back to the Derelict. That or we can get a drink here. Just relax!"

Shiro shot him another glare. "No."

"No?! To what? You planning to stay here?"

"Let me think!"

"Fine, fine," Drifter raised his hands, face twisting into an expression of curiosity. "What ya plannin'?"

"You don't get to know until I've got him."

"*Him?*" Drifter paused. "There's not another guy is there?"

"Stop talking." Shiro slipped into one of the rooms surrounding Spider's Lair. He'd need to find another way into Crow's room,.

"Would make a lot of sense if there was," Drifter added. "You've been so distant recently. Not just literally but *physically*."

"Do I need to mute my audial receptors," Suzume whispered.

"No, we're not talking about this," Shiro made his way through connected rooms, pushing aside crates that were in his way.

"We need to talk eventually—"

Shiro pushed open the next door. It caught on some crate sitting in front of it but he saw Crow jump in surprise.

“Fuck, I *knew* it was another guy!” Drifter’s yelled though it was more of a laugh.

Crow was standing in the center of the room, eyes wide with fear as they flicked between him and Drifter. “I’m sorry. Spider called. I needed to answer...”

“It’s fine,” Shiro managed to squeeze himself through the gap in the door so he could start moving Crow’s crates out of the way.

“What are you doing?” Crow asked, still glancing from him to Drifter with a little fear.

“Just follow us,” Shiro moved the last crate out of the way and pushed the door open.

Crow began forward, hesitantly.

“Hey, call me Drifter,” the green-robed man extended a hand for Crow who didn’t know what to do with it.

Shiro rolled his eyes, picking up his pace to push past the both of them. “Where’s your ship?”

“Right outside. Shouldn’t be too hard to smuggle this pretty face outta here,” Drifter grinned at Crow who just looked away with a more panicked expression. “We just goin’ back to the Tower with him?”

“Wait... What?” Crow began to slow his pace.

They both stopped to stare at him, Shiro speaking first. “We’re getting you out of here.”

“No. N-No, no, I can’t leave!” Crow backed up.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

Crow remained silent, looking to Glint who was floating nearby.

The Ghost met his eyes hesitantly. “Spider rigged my shell with explosives. If I leave the Shore, it will go off.”

Spider’s words flashed back into his mind. The mob boss said he’d made “alterations” ever since he’d left the Shore. Was this bomb the alteration? Guilt pulled at his heart. *They’ve been trapped here thanks to him...*

That was what Glint had been trying to warn him about.

There were tears in the Awoken man’s eyes. “I have to go back...”

“No you don’t,” Shiro asserted. “I can diffuse it.”

“Right here and right now? No way,” Drifter scoffed.

“Not helping,” Shiro started to think. There was undoubtedly some anti-tampering device that he’d have to worry about on top of the explosives... “I’ve diffused enough explosives to know all the tricks.”

“So can you do it?” Crow whispered.

“Yeah, can you?” Glint repeated, his shell constricting fearfully.

“No,” Shiro frowned, hating himself for his answer. “I want to be 100% sure before I do something that could kill both of you... Is there a chance you have a blueprint?”

“No,” Glint answered quietly.

“I’m going to have to go back...” Crow’s lip twitched.’

“‘Back’ might not be the better option, brother,” Drifter warned as he caught the sound of claws scrambling on metal.

Shiro lifted his eyes, watching Avrok charge towards them.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry for a break in the posting schedule! I'm nearing the end of my semester and have been quite busy.

Updates should be coming quicker, if not every weekend, from now on.

Enjoy!

Everything happened in a fraction of a second.

Shiro's hand instinctively shot down to unholster a Trespasser that wasn't there. He lifted his gaze to Drifter. The green-robed man had his hand on his own weapon, though he was hesitating. Shiro glanced forward. Avrok was still charging at them, but Crow had stepped forward, pleading to Avrok in an alien language.

He wasn't about to wait to see if it worked.

He lifted his hand, summoning his Light from within. Avrok broke his stride, attempting to scramble out of the way of what Shiro had been *planning* to be a burst of Arc Light. Instead, deep blue Stasis shot from his hand, over Crow's shoulder, and instantly froze the Elikśni upon impact.

Crow flinched, stepping away from Avrok's frozen form, though his eyes were locked on it. "W-What?"

Shiro glanced down at his own hands and the frost that was building up on the surface.

"He'll be alright," Drifter answered for him.

Shiro looked up from his hands, meeting Crow's fearful eyes. "He will," he assured. "Come on, we have to leave."

Now Crow was hesitating, glancing from them to Avrok's frozen form. Even locked inside a block of Stasis, the Elikśni's eyes flickered between them.

"Can you remove the bomb?" Glint spoke up for him.

"Yes, but not here," Shiro answered. "It's far too risky to start when anyone like *Avrok* could burst in."

There was a strained growl from the trapped Elikśni.

"Where would we even go?" Crow was looking more disheartened every passing moment.

The outpost? Definitely not if Petra was still there... "Worse comes to worst we just do it out in the open. Anywhere that's not here."

"Derelict's parked nearby," Drifter suggested, nudging his shoulder. "It's got anything you'd need crammed inside. Plus it's a free ride back to the City."

"Yeah, but..." Shiro cut himself off at the thought of explosives going off in the Derelict. *Or the fact that he'd be on it.*

"I don't want to leave until I know I won't have to come back," Crow spoke softly. "Can't we just try to do it here?"

"Like he said, kid, too risky," Drifter walked over, clapping a hand on Crow's shoulder. "Come with us."

Crow's silence was enough of an answer.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Drifter pressed.

"Spider," Shiro stepped forward, pulling the green-robed man away from him.

Drifter's expression changed to one of realization. "What Spider do ta ya?" He looked at Crow.

The New Light's eyes angled down to the floor. It obviously wasn't anything good.

"Nothing kind," Glint spoke up for Crow.

"He hurt ya?"

Crow didn't answer, though more tears welled in his eyes, refracting the golden glow of his irises.

"So you're just gonna stay here and let him do that to ya?" Drifter asked, a little anger in his tone.

"Drifter," Shiro warned.

"No, you've got the chance ta get away from him and you're not takin' it!" Drifter snapped at Crow. "Is he even abusing you or is it all in your head, because I know Spider. He can be cruel but he's always fair."

"Hey, *that's* hardly fair, you ass," Shiro hit Drifter on the shoulder hard enough to make him wince.

"Hey!"

Shiro ignored Drifter, turning his attention back to Crow.

“I’m staying here,” the Awoken man murmured, eyes still locked on the floor.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Shiro frowned.

Crow nodded weakly.

“So let’s go,” Drifter directed at Shiro. “No reason ta try an’ convince ‘im now.”

Yeah, because of you, Shiro wanted to snap but kept his attention on Crow. The New Light was already turning to leave for his own quarters.

“Don’t go after ‘im!” Drifter snapped. “Spider’ll never let ya go if he gets a hold’a you again.”

Shiro watched until the New Light disappeared behind a corner.

“Okay, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but *go with Drifter!*” Suzume flashed into view beside him. “We can still save Crow from inside the City’s walls! Just go with Drifter!”

Shiro looked to Drifter, frowning at his smug expression.

“Hey, *I’d* even go with me! Especially if lil’ sista agrees!”

Suzume rolled her eye in her shell.

"Fine," Shiro said before he could decide against it.

"Bout time!" Drifter spun around, heading down the way they'd come from.

"You're taking me straight back to the City," he fell into stride beside Drifter. "If you're just going to take me through a thousand “shortcuts”, I'll find another way back."

"Don't worry. You'll be in the City in the next few hours. Trust."

— —

"Kay, coords are set," Drifter exited the cockpit, walking over to stretch out on the couch beside him.

Shiro kept his eyes forward, refusing to look at him.

“Hey, you can check if ya don't believe me," he gestured at the open cockpit door.

“I believe you,” he spoke evenly.

“Alright,” Drifter adjusted himself, though Shiro could tell that he was slowly trying to move closer to him. “Glad ya do, cuz I’m gonna be missin’ all the action on Europa.”

Shiro glanced at the green-robed man, his curiosity surpassing his anger. “What’s happening on Europa?”

Drifter grinned. “The Guardian arrived.”

“Which one?”

“You know the one.”

Oh. *That* one... Shiro couldn’t help but smirk. That Guardian always had a part in everything big. They destroyed the Black Heart, raided the Vault of Glass, slew Crota and his spawn, captured Skolas, took on Oryx, the Taken King... He even got a chance to work with the Guardian during the SIVA outbreak.

“They’ve been kickin’ ass all over Europa. Have the House’a Salvation runnin’ for the safety of that City’a theirs!” Drifter laughed.

“But you left,” Shiro cut in.

“Eh, I just clocked out early. No reason for *me* ta be there,” Drifter shrugged. “Plus I got a little hunch on where ya were. Turned out ta be right.”

They both went silent for a moment at the thought of the Tangled Shore.

“I really have to get him out of there...”

“Who? Crow?” Drifter frowned.

“Yeah.” He couldn’t get the fear in the Awoken’s eyes out of his head.

“There wasn’t much ya could’ve done for him. He was being stubborn,” Drifter shrugged.

“I was, too,” he argued. “I probably could’ve disabled the bomb if I’d given it a try. I’ve done it a thousand times.”

“Yeah, but it also could’ve blown his Ghost to bits... Maybe your choice ta not do anything saved the kid’s life?”

Yeah, but his choice forces Crow to stay with someone who’s obviously abusing him... “Let’s talk about something else—the Guardian. What else are they doing on Europa?”

Drifter chuckled.

He frowned. “Tell me.”

“Let’s just say there’s another Stasis Guardian that joined the ranks.”

“You’re kidding...”

“I’m not,” he laughed. “They’re a natural at it thanks to my contact’s help. Ya know, she could help you, too—“

“I’ve already said I’m not interested in anything that will increase what Stasis I have. I want it gone.”

Drifter got quiet, looking at him with a bit of disappointment. “You still closed off to it?”

Shiro didn’t answer, returning his gaze forward as he waited for them to arrive in the City.

— —

Shiro stepped down the steep ramp leading down from the Derelict, walking across the hangar with purpose.

He needed to talk with Amanda as soon as soon as possible. His jumpship was still somewhere on Europa. He’d need to borrow a ship so he could retrieve it and transmit it back to Earth, but a big part of him didn’t want to bother with it. He wanted to just ask her to build a new one, *though that would take time Crow didn’t have...*

“Shiro, hey!” Ahead, Amanda slid down from a slanted wing, landing on the ground a few steps in front of him. “It’s been a—“ She paused, looking behind him.

Shiro glanced over his shoulder, finding Drifter walking up to stand beside them.

Amanda continued after clearing his throat. “Zavala’s been lookin’ everywhere for you. Tried to get in contact to see what you wanted me to say, but I never got an answer.”

“That was me,” Suzume spoke up. “We got into a little trouble and I couldn’t risk having a message intercepted.”

“Geez, what kind of trouble?” Amanda glanced between them.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Shiro said, ignoring Drifter’s laugh from behind him. “I need something from you though...”

“Yeah?”

“Is their a jumpship I could borrow? We had to leave mine on Europa but I need to get it back.”

“Damn right you need ta get that back, thing’s a work of art,” Amanda gave a brief smile that faded as she thought. “Unfortunately, there’s no extras I got here that are equipped for long-distance flight. Sorry.”

“That’s fine,” he said, already brainstorming for alternatives.

“I could possibly see if Saint’ll retrieve it for you,” Amanda suggested. “He’s always looking for things to do since Zavala keeps canceling his Trials. Want me to run it by him?”

Shiro thought for a moment. *Saint-14 would be the perfect Guardian to help him rescue Crow. He wouldn't recognize him... Hmm... Having Saint in Spider's Lair might not be a good idea unless he wanted a repeat of what the Titan had done to the Devils' Kell all those years ago...*

Then he'll talk with Osiris. The Warlock had worked with the Awoken Queen and her brother in the past. He would recognize Crow instantly. Though given his former status as an exile, he'd likely be more understanding in addition to being able to keep Saint in check...

"I'd be alright with that," he finally said.

"I'll let him know," Amanda promised, turning back to climb onto the jumpship she'd been working on.

— —

A team of armed Guardians led by Commander Zavala approached him and Drifter as they stepped into the courtyard. Shiro slowed his pace, trying to read the Commander's stern expression. Was this about the Hunter Vanguard position again?

His internal sigh was cut off when the armed Guardians surrounded them.

"Commander, what's going on?" He stiffened. At his side, Drifter stiffened, too, a cold mist forming around his forearms.

"I expected better from you, Shiro..."

Expected Better... Did he mean his Stasis? How did he even know about that?

"...I didn't chose this," Shiro began slowly, though Zavala payed him no attention.

The Vanguard Commander gave a signal to the Guardians and they raised their weapons.

"I've been trying to get rid of it!" He raised his voice. "

The Commander's gaze hardened. "I warned you about the Drifter. He was always going to drag you down with him sooner or later..."

"None of this is my fault it's—" He turned to his side to look at Drifter but the green-robed man was no longer by his side. He'd disappeared...

"Shiro-4. You are now a threat to the City. One that must be taken down... Fire."

Shiro shot awake, launching a sharpened ring of Stasis at the ceiling. He was about to launch another when he came to his senses. It was just a dream...

He sunk back against the mattress, staring up at the large crystalline structure he'd created. He was going to have to find a way to get rid of this Stasis fast or that dream with the Commander might become reality... Shiro sighed, rolling over to get out of bed, bumping into the sleeping form of who he instantly recognized to be Drifter.

Oh no... What did they do last night?

Shiro shook the thought away before he had time to think about it, choosing to hit Drifter on the shoulder. Hard.

"Ow," Drifter groaned out but didn't move from his spot.

Shiro hit him again. "Wake up."

"It's too early..." Drifter rubbed his shoulder. "Why we gotta be up this early?"

"Because you're leaving," instead of hitting him again, he started pushing at the man to try to get him to move.

Drifter's eyes shot open, flashing anger despite the fact they were still unfocused. "No, I'm not."

"It's my place—my *bed*—and I said you have to."

Drifter just pressed himself deeper into the covers as if to challenge him. "What's the problem with me staying?"

"I don't want you here," Shiro pushed him harder, trying to get all the leverage he could to push the man out of the bed.

Drifter snorted. "Didn't seem that way last night."

"It's that way *now* and you're doing little to help your case."

"Fuck, why you gotta be like this?" Drifter shoved back against him, moving so he could sit against the headboard. "Things have been good between us for the past week!"

"How exactly?"

"Well, I get to actually *see* you more than on our rare hookups. I mean, what's gotten into you? We used ta see each other multiple times a day, then multiple times a week, then a few times a month, and now I'm lucky if I see you more than a handful of times a season."

Well, if there was ever a good opportunity to say this...

"Probably has to do with your Gambit."

"Gambit?"

“Yeah, I *hate* the whole concept of it,” He spat. “So I hope you can imagine how much of a *turn off* it is when you bring it up every five minutes.”

“Hey! I never bring up Gambit while we’re hangin’!”

“That’s because while ‘we’re hangin,’ we’re usually doing something else!” Shiro shook his head, mumbling. “I swear, the only good part of this relationship is the sex...”

A big smile worked its way onto Drifter’s face and he laughed. “I only see that as a compliment.”

Shiro rolled his eyes. “And that’s a prime example of why...”

Drifter’s smile faded into a scowl. “You’re not a perfect lover either.”

“Did I ever say I was?”

“No, but ya always put me down like I’m doin’ somethin’ wrong. You’re much worse than I am!”

“At least I’m not leaving you to Fallen mob bosses or infecting you with Darkness,” Shiro glared daggers at the man who was still not budging from his bed.

Drifter chuckled a bit. “Think I prefer that over the close-minded preaching and belittling.”

“I don’t—“

“You do. You talk to me like I’m dumb, Shiro,” Drifter continued, moving to stand from the bed and gathering his coat from where it’d been haphazardly grown on a chair. “I’d *never* talk ta you like that...”

He watched Drifter adjust himself, unable to form a response. Even though he had a lot of built-up anger for Drifter, he couldn’t help the terrible feeling washing over him at how upset Drifter sounded.

“You’re used to a certain way, an’ there’s nothin’ wrong with that. You’ve just been taught the ways of the Light for so long that you don’t know the first thing about the Dark...” Drifter shook his head. “Thought I could help you understand it. Not for me but for *you*.”

The green-robed man finished dressing and headed for the door. He pulled it open, turning to look at him before he left. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about the Stasis.”

Drifter stepped through the door, letting it close behind him.

Chapter 9

From a personal device, Shiro skimmed through the surface of the Vanguard archives. *A lot* had happened on Europa... *House Salvation's leadership had been broken, the Clovis Bray labs were mostly reclaimed from the Elikzni, and if that wasn't impressive enough, the Deep Stone Crypt had been found...*

How, he had no idea... The Crypt has been no more than legend before... Now, new secrets we're revealed every day...

Shiro opened a recent report. Six Guardians had been sent to rid Eramis' remaining forces from the Crypt... *Taniks had been there...*

He closed the report nearly as soon as he'd opened it, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "I know we had to intervene. I know we couldn't let the Elikzni get a hold of Golden Age tech but..." he sighed again. "I wish we could've wiped it all from history..."

Suzume floated beside him, giving him a sympathetic look. "I do too, but we shouldn't pass up a resource like this even if the source is so..."

"Dark?" He finished for her.

"Yeah," she paused. "I'd rather it be another way, but at least we have access to Clovis' research. We can use it for good. Unlike him."

"True," he agreed, standing to walk over to the door to leave his room. "Should probably go visit Banshee. Pick up some assignments while I avoid Zavala."

Suzume laughed. "That's a good idea. Both parts."

Shiro nodded, stepping out into the hall and heading in the direction of the Wall's courtyard. He reached a metal staircase and took it to the top level. Already, he could see Banshee working on some weapon. The gunsmith's posture was stiff and uncomfortable, frustrated even. He knew why.

There were rumors going around about Banshee being the original Clovis Bray... He couldn't even imagine what Banshee was going through right now. Having one's past revealed on such a broad scale was exactly what Shiro feared would happen to him... All Exos feared it. Now that the Deep Stone Crypt was open, these were very real fears.

Shiro tried not to believe the rumors. They were too vague anyway and no Vanguard records he had access to gave him any indication the rumors were true. Still, he didn't have access to *all* classified Guardian operations. Not even the Vanguard did now it seemed... *So much going on under their noses...*

Did Drifter have a part in that?

He pushed the thought away for later and continued through the courtyard. Banshee had already seen him, leaving the weapon he was fixing to stand behind the counter.

“Any prototypes you need me to take out?” Shiro asked, noticing how Banshee’s stiff posture relaxed in his—another Exo’s—presence.

Banshee returned to the weapon he’d been fixing and brought it back. “A Guardian dropped this off. Been too distracted to look at it.”

“What’s the issue?” Shiro asked, taking the weapon off the counter.

“Jammed.”

Shiro flicked the safety off.

Before he could take a look at the rest of the weapon, Banshee let out a breath-like laugh and took it back from him. “Should’ve figured it was something like that...”

“You really didn’t catch that?” Shiro smirked.

“Distracted,” Banshee repeated with a shrug.

Shiro wanted to *say* something, but he just nodded in understanding instead.

“Hey, why don’t I fix you somethin’,” Banshee was quick to change the subject. “You never got your Trespasser back, did you? I could make you a new one. Free of charge.”

He should say yes this time, even though he likes to kit-bash his own weapons together... Projects would give Banshee something to do during this difficult time...

“Sure,” he said. “I won’t say no to a free gun.”

Banshee grabbed a notepad and wrote a note for himself. “You promise to use this one?” He asked.

“Of course.”

“Not just for spare parts.”

“Well, I’m always taking my weapons apart, so I can’t promise that.”

Banshee chuckled a bit, finishing his note and tucking it away. “I’ll get working on it. Should be done by closing time... Probably.”

“Alright, I’ll see you then—“

The sound of a Hammer of Sol, and the burning heat that came with it, cut him off. He spun around, feeling the chill of his Stasis spreading down his arms as he searched for the attacker: a golden Titan.

She sprinted right past him towards the back of the Courtyard where a Warlock had just exited from the Hangar. She threw her shoulder into him, sending him sailing through the air to land in a pile of seared robes.

“I know where you went!” She screamed. “I know what you *did!*”

The sudden attack had left the Warlock stunned. He struggled to stand, all coordination between his limbs temporarily hindered by the heavy blow. Still, the rage was evident on his face, and once he recovered, that rage was focused on the enraged Titan.

“Stasis won’t help you ‘fight the Darkness,” the Titan snapped. “Look! I’m fighting *you* and *winning!*”

The Warlock roared, summoning a crystalline staff and aiming it directly at the Titan. She threw herself out of the way of the icy projectiles that froze the ground where she’d been standing and lunged at the Warlock again. He lifted himself into the air, summoning more Stasis crystals that melted into steam the moment molten Solar Light touched it.

Almost as quickly as the storm began, it ended with a pulse of Arc Light.

“Keep it in the Crucible!” Lord Shaxx stepped between the two Guardians, holding them back with his presence alone.

“Traitors like him shouldn’t be *allowed* in the Crucible!” The Titan snapped.

“What do you think about this?” Shiro whispered to Banshee, eyes still on the dispute.

A moment passed with no response and he glanced to see the gunsmith’s eyes on the Stasis crystals spreading down his gauntlets. Shiro quickly folded his arms, trying to hide what Banshee had already seen.

Banshee looked up, focusing back on the crowd that was now dispersing. “Not my place to say...”

“Yeah, but what do you think anyway?” He pressed. “About Stasis...”

The old gunsmith shrugged, staying silent for a moment as he thought. “Can only go off of what I’ve seen... It’s the people with the Light that’ve turned hostile. Not those with Stasis... And the fact that you have it,” Banshee lowered his voice. “Tells me it won’t corrupt the right people.”

Shiro wanted to argue with Banshee, wanted to tell him that it hadn’t been his *choice* to wield Stasis, but he just nodded.

“Thank you.”

Okay... Just because he's *watching* Gambit, doesn't mean anything. He's bored, there's no good Crucible matches on tonight, and he just... got curious.

He's never actually seen Gambit or really knows how it works, all he's had to go off of are rumors. So he put the channel on to find out for himself. It's still fairly new. Until recently, Gambit was a very hushed event. Zavala got involved and forced Drifter to make it more public, so now anyone can watch it. *As long as they're willing to sit through the constant cut-offs and long periods of time with no audio.*

Drifter's always been on a budget...

After one round, Shiro's still confused. He barely knows how the bank works, what it even does, or why the motes are so important... And *if* they are so important, why does Drifter have the teams fight each other and lose motes in the process? Wouldn't it be more efficient to *not* include so-called 'invasions'?

After another round, he still has questions, but now he's starting to focus on each of the teams. Specifically the Guardians playing.

There's the Warlock from earlier. He's gliding above a crowd of Scorn, freezing the corrupted Fallen to shatter them. Beneath the Warlock, a Hunter zips in, teleporting forward to grab the motes, then throwing a frozen shuriken to finish up the rest of the enemies.

"I'm not surprised Drifter attracted all the Stasis-wielders," Suzume commented.

"Yeah," Shiro stared at the screen, watching through choppy footage as the teams summon their Primevals. "No surprise there."

"Do you think..." Suzume cut herself off.

He glanced at her, seeing uncertainty in her eye.

"Do you think there's a cure? Since more Guardians are being trained to wield Stasis, Eris and Drifter must have figured something out."

Shiro looked back at the screen. "I doubt it. From what I've seen, most of the Guardians using Stasis haven't reverted back to their original subclasses."

"Maybe it's by choice? I mean, Stasis is pretty new, some of these Guardians probably want to try it out," Suzume suggested.

She had a point there, even though he couldn't relate to wanting to use Stasis... It would go with everything he'd been told by Eris, that the only way to "cure" it was to accept it.

"I hope it's by choice. I honestly do," he finally said. "Because if it's not..."

"There'll be consequences," Suzume finished.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “A whole hell of a lot.”

— —

“Ya hear what’s happenin’ on the Tangled Shore?” Amanda asked him as she worked on a sparrow.

“What’s happening?” Shiro leaned against a steel support beam watching her work.

“*Xivu Arath.*”

“Xivu Arath?” He repeated. “Damn, I haven’t heard that name since the Taken War.”

“Yeah, apparently, she’s usin’ her magic ta ‘recruit’ more Hive,” Amanda continued. “Heard it’s gotten pretty bad. So bad the Vanguard’s workin’ with *Spider* again.”

“Spider...”

It had been quite awhile since he’d thought of the mob boss—and *who he was keeping under lock and key*—but it had always been in the back of his mind... *Crow... With more attention on the Shore, he would be in greater danger of discovery... but Shiro would also have the best chance at rescuing him and bringing him back...*

What luck that Xivu Arath had decided to keep the Tangled Shore of all places distracted for him.

Amanda looked up from the sparrow, smirking at him. “Why’re ya repeatin’ everythin’ I’m sayin’?”

“No reason,” he responded, still thinking. “I’m just figuring supply drops are difficult for your ships.”

“Yeah, *difficult*’s definitely a word for it,” she reached into the sparrow’s chassis with a tool. “This week we’ve already had four ships go down. The Hive ogres *love* a moving target.”

“Ogres are never good. I’m pretty lucky I don’t have to deal with *them* in the places I patrol...” he paused. “With the Hive presence, I’m sure Osiris is on the case.”

Amanda lifted her gaze again, voice quieting. “Ya haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Osiris,” Amanda frowned. “Lost Sagira... and his Light... to the Hive...”

“W-What?” He stuttered. “How?”

She shrugged. "I don't know the details, I just know that it happened. He's been off duty for the past few days recovering..."

"That..." he cleared his throat. "That doesn't seem possible. Osiris has been studying the Hive for *centuries*, he'd never let that happen..."

Amanda shrugged again. "Well, it happened... I haven't seen him since, but Saint has. Says he's still in shock and not his usual self..."

"I probably wouldn't be either..."

Losing Suzume and his Light... He couldn't imagine it...

"Yeah... We really need his expertise, but obviously *he* needs time," she continued to work on the sparrow, voice remaining solemn. "I'd go speak to Saint when you get a chance. He seems pretty lonely."

"I was heading over there anyway. Anything you need me to tell him?"

She brought a dirtied hand to her chin as she thought. "There's some bends on the leading edges of his jumpship and some cracks on the cockpit glass... You can tell 'im to put in a request and I'll get to it."

"Will do," he nodded, turning to cross the hangar.

He could already see Saint-14 standing by his jumpship, feeding the pigeons that had gathered there. *This was still possible with just Saint... but it would be difficult if something set the Titan off. Saint wasn't unreasonable, but he was still so new to how things worked off-world.*

As Shiro approached, the Titan looked up with a warm chuckle. "I thought you only came here to speak with Amanda."

Shiro smirked. "Yeah. She wants to do some repairs on your ship."

Saint glanced at his jumpship before looking back at him. "I do not see any issue..."

"I didn't think so either, but she's better at noticing that sort of thing."

"Hm... Then I will put in request," Saint responded, still staring at him. Through the Titan's helmet, Shiro could sense a grin. "I assume there is something else? Hunters don't often socialize for nothing."

"You got me. I *do* need your help with something." He looked over his shoulder, double checking that no one else was in earshot. *Here it goes...* "How willing are you to keep a secret from the Vanguard?"

Saint slowly tilted his helm to the side. "What kind of secret?"

"I can't say until you answer the question..."

Saint paused, thinking. “Then I am afraid I cannot promise anything...”

Looks like he's gonna have to share a bit more... He's not about to resort to... to Drifter for help rescuing Crow. Absolutely not...

Shiro glanced around again. *They were still alone.* “There’s a Fallen mob boss holding a New Light against his will.”

“What?” Saint’s shoulders grew visibly tense. “Where?”

“The Tangled Shore. That’s where he was revived,” he answered.

“Why don’t the Vanguard know of this?! Why must it be kept secret?!”

“Because they *can’t* know,” he lowered his voice, prompting Saint to do the same.

“Why?” Saint dropped to a whisper.

“Because, okay? That’s all I can tell you... for this New Light’s safety...”

The Titan was silent for a moment, seeming to understand. “How did you even find this Guardian?”

“By chance...” *It technically wasn’t a lie.* “He’s been there for a couple years at most...”

“I assume you are recruiting me to aid in his rescue?”

Chapter 10

The Gray Pigeon slows as it enters the Tangled Shore.

“Tell me about this New Light,” Saint-14 relaxed back into his seat, letting Geppetto take the controls. “There must be more to their story than simply ‘because.’”

Shiro kept silent for a long moment. *He’d known this was coming and had thought up ways around it, but maybe a bit of honesty would be the best for both of them. Saint had offered to help without knowing anything. He deserved something for that... and hey, he probably wouldn’t tell anyone—except for Osiris, but Shiro had wanted to involve Osiris anyway.*

“His name’s Crow...”

"Yes," Saint nodded.

“And the Fallen on the Shore found him before any of us could. He’s been living with them ever since.”

“Living? You said he was being held against his will,” Saint responded, crossing his arms. “What keeps him from leaving?”

Explosives. Explosives kept Crow from leaving, but Saint couldn’t know this. At least not yet.

“The fact he knows them better than us,” Shiro answered. “He wasn’t willing to leave with me when I found him because he didn’t trust me...” *That, and the fact Shiro didn’t believe he could disarm the bomb...*

This time would be different.

“Is there still a Ghost in the picture?”

“Glint.”

“Why hasn’t this Glint brought Crow back to the City?”

“It’s complicated...” Shiro paused. “Believe it or not, the Fallen have been keeping him safe from danger on the Shore... including other Guardians...”

“Other Guardians... Why?”

Telling Saint this much was probably going to end up biting him in the ass, but if there was ever a Guardian who would understand, it would be Saint. The Titan had been a legend for so long... People had developed their own image of him... Nearly everything he did faced harsh judgement on how people thought he should be.

“Crow wasn’t dead long before Glint brought him back. He was someone that everyone knew—everyone *hated*—including me... Obviously he doesn’t remember any of that, but people

back at the City will and I don't think they're ready to forgive him for it..."

"Hm..."

"You're the only Guardian I know of who wasn't here when Crow's past life... did what he did. So I thought I could trust you to not smash his face in the second you see him."

Saint chuckled at his attempt at levity. "No harm will come to Crow as long as I'm here. The Fallen keeping him, though..." His voice dropped off, leaving the threat unsaid as the ship reached the outskirts of the Tangled Shore.

"No smashing their faces in ei—"

"Sorry to interrupt, Brother Shiro, but where would you like me to land?" Geppetto flashed into view.

"Here. I'll send you the coordinates to Spider's Lair," Suzume answered for him. "Get us atop the asteroid ridge. Nothing will see us up there."

"Right away."

Shiro looked back to Saint. "We're not shooting our way to Crow. These Fallen are working with the Vanguard. Kind of..."

"Oh... That's right..." Saint grew unusually quiet, *angry* even.

Great...

"Plus, I've never been in good favor with them," he added. "So stealth is my only option."

"*Your* only option?" Saint asked. "What of me?"

"You? Oh, I figured you'd stay with the ship. I mean, I'm the one who knows where he is. I'll be in and out." *And likely won't get in a fistfight...*

"Shiro," Saint stared at him. "I came to help rescue a Guardian and I intend to do just that."

— —

"I take back my offer of assistance."

"It's not fitting?" Shiro barely held back a laugh from where he stood outside the closed compartment Saint was changing in.

"No! Traveler above, how do you Hunters *fit* in this tiny—" a sharp, tearing noise came from the compartment. Saint sighed in frustration. "This will not work, I need to wear my *own* armor."

“Can’t. You’ll be recognized.”

“And you *won’t*!”

“Okay, yeah, if anyone looks close enough, they’ll obviously know it’s me, but I’ve had ‘business’ on the Shore before. I’m not some mythical, back from the dead, Lightbearer to them.”

“So, what, *I* am? What does it matter? You said there is no fighting in this ‘Spider’s Lair’. Or do these rules not apply to the Fallen?” Saint argued.

“They do, but you’ll still bring way too much attention if you get seen. So, it’s either you slip into an old armor set of mine, or you get to hang with the Ghosts for a bit.”

They couldn’t risk Suzume and Geppetto. The Elikśni on the Shore had tech that could contain Ghosts... It was safer for them to stay here. Besides, they’d be in and out with Crow in no time.

“Here, I’m coming in,” Geppetto drifted up to the closed door, nudging it open just enough to slip inside. “Oh, Traveler, you did a number on that poor fabric...”

“Geppe—“ Saint cut himself off. “Shiro, I am so sorry, I—“

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured the Titan with a chuckle. “That armor hasn’t seen use in half a century.”

“Yeah, no hard feelings. It was only something *I* synthesized,” Suzume added.

“You made this, Sister Suzume?” Geppetto asked.

"It's one of my earlier creations."

"Then it is a good thing I am here to improve upon it," Geppetto commented with a humorous tone.

"Mean!"

“I’m only kidding!”

“Oh, I know you are, G. You couldn’t insult me if your Light depended on it.”

“Now *that’s* mean!”

The door swung open and Saint walked out, pulling uncomfortably at the fabric that clung to him. “This is going to be unbearable...”

“Oh, relax, you look fine,” Shiro joked, beckoning Saint to follow him off the ship.

“I *know* I look fine, I am told this all the time,” a chuckle broke it’s way through Saint’s discomfort. He looked up as he began to follow, pausing. “That is a new cloak.”

"This? Yeah," Shiro glanced down at the jade snake coiled on the dark fabric. *It was something Drifter had given him awhile back. Shiro hadn't wanted to take it. Hunters didn't just give each other cloaks, but Drifter didn't know that, so now he was stuck with it...*

"Why the change?"

"Don't want to draw attention, either. Scraps of Kings banners are pretty noticeable."

"Ah," Saint nodded. "So those *were* Kings banners. I thought they were."

"You remember the Kings?"

"Of course! They were savages! Murdered too many Ghosts—too many New Lights! Many just moments after their revival..." Saint recalled. "I am glad someone was there to pay them back in my absence."

"Yeah," Shiro hesitated. "The Kings are gone, though, same with the other old houses... In fact, many don't care that I wear shredded Kings banners, but it's better to just assume they do. It's safer."

Saint nodded slowly, going quiet again. "You mean the *Fallen* don't care?"

"Yeah, most don't."

Saint shakes his helm with a frustrated sigh.

Shiro glances at Saint, unsure whether the Titan's angry with the Fallen or with Guardians for working with them...

"It's a lot to process," Shiro says. "A few years back, I never would've seen myself working with Fallen, but things have changed."

Saint remains silent.

"Just act natural in there. Some may try to start fights, but don't fall for it... We're not staying longer than it takes for me to get Crow."

Traveler willing...

— —

Theoretically, all he'd have to do is throw a smoke grenade down and they could both sneak into Spider's Lair unseen. *Stasis, of course, made that impossible.* He *still* couldn't use his Light, even though it's been so long...

Fine. It's not like he hasn't had to be creative before.

There's a connected bar just to the side of the Lair. Ever since Eramis and the promise of Salvation, House Dusk's cleared out, leaving the bar to Spider's Associates. None of which will think twice about two Guardians coming in for a drink...

"You are sure about this?" Saint whispers through a clenched jaw.

Up ahead, a group of Elikśni were loitering around the entrance to the club. From the way they all sway, it's easy to tell they're drunk, *though that's likely not the reason they were kicked out...*

"Yes, I'm sure," he tells Saint without taking his eyes off the group of Elikśni. "Keep close. We're gonna walk right through them. Then once we're inside, just follow my lead..."

As they approach, most of the drunk Elikśni stumble out of their way, but one eyes Saint. She reaches out when he passes, grabbing Saint's cloak with a chittering laugh. Shiro spins around before Saint can, yanking the cloak out of her claws and roughly shoving her away. It catches her off-guard, giving her no time to retaliate before they're both inside.

The lobby's overflowing with weapon crates. *Must be busy tonight... Not a bad thing...* He walks over to the Associate by the crates and hands him his weapons. Saint's at his side, standing stiffly. When Spider's Associate has organized his weapons, he turns to Saint.

"Give him your weapons," Shiro whispers.

"I am not going in unarmed..."

The Associate blinks, trying to understand Saint's words through his thick accent.

"You're armed with Light. Just give him your weapons."

Saint glances at his Perfect Paradox then gives in and hands it over to the Associate.

The Associate organizes it into the crate before gesturing them through. The club is full tonight. Numerous Elikśni, and some Cabal, fill the tables. Shiro scans the crowd, finding an empty booth near the back, and begins towards it.

"That weapon is important. I do not like leaving it behind," Saint's voice is barely audible over the sound of slurred alien language.

"We're not gonna," he says, then speaks into the comms. "Suzume, you think you can transmat our weapons back to us once we get to the Lair?"

"I should be able to," she answers. "Let me know when."

"Will do," he clicks his end off, sitting down in the empty booth.

Saint slides in across from him, though he's tense and ready to stand at any moment. "What is the plan?"

Shiro barely hears him. *Just sitting here brings him back to when the Scorn first attacked Spider's Palace. How everyone scrambled in terror.*

Even years later, the Elikzni on the Shore are still terrified of the Scorn. Something resembling the Dark power Scorn wield would surely set them off... He balls his hands into fists underneath the table, feeling the way the frigid crystals form in his palms. If he throws Stasis into the crowd, it should be enough... There's no way anyone here knows it's even possible for Guardians to use Stasis yet...

"I'm going to cause a distraction," he whispers, leaning closer to Saint. "I need you to get everyone's attention."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Stand up and start heading towards the bar," he says. "Don't get too close, just stand off to the side like you're looking at the menu. They won't like you looming over them."

"Then what?" Saint asks. "What is the signal?"

"No signal," he answers. "The moment everyone starts running, look for me." *This was either going to work perfectly or fail miserably...*

Saint nods, standing to head towards the bar. Shiro keeps an eye on him. He's walking stiffly, and that on it's own is enough to draw looks. When Saint stops just off to the side of the bar, right behind two tusked Cabal, the looks become annoyed. They don't appreciate how close he's lurking around. One of the Cabal turns around in her seat, rumbling out a threat. More heads turn to witness the fight that's seconds from unfolding.

Now.

Shiro stands, bringing his hands out from under the table. Stasis begins to envelop his arms. This time, he doesn't try to stop it. He calls it forth just like he would with the Light. He brings his arm back, preparing to throw a chunk of Stasis. The handle of a frozen weapon forms in his hand. When he swings his arm forward to release, the weapon—a frozen kama—whirls through the air, crashing into the bar. All the glass shatters and an icy storm kicks up.

The club immediately erupts into guttural roars and high-pitched screeches.

Shiro goes still. He can feel his Stasis pulsing up his arms in time with his heart. He expects the club's occupants to turn on him but no one's looking to who threw it. Elikzni and Cabal are too busy rushing the exits, knocking over tables and chairs to outrun the raging storm... *His raging storm...*

Shiro snaps out of his panic and jumps out of the booth to search for Saint. In the swirling Stasis, he spots the Titan barreling through the crowd. Shiro signals for him to follow and darts into the back door. He waits for Saint to pass through, sealing the door behind them.

Instantly, the roar of the storm fades, replaced by the humming of machinery and distant chattering.

Saint snags him by his arm. "You wield *Stasis*!"

"Hey!" He attempts to pull free, but Saint's grip is too strong. "It wasn't my choice!"

"What do you mean?" Saint's hold momentarily loosens, but not enough for him to get away.

"I didn't consciously choose it!"

Saint lets him go and he stumbles. "So you were corrupted?"

"Yes! Well, technically no, that's not how it works... I think—but that doesn't matter. Come on!" Shiro's already sprinting down the tunnel leading to Spider's Lair. Saint follows after him, though he keeps his distance.

Shiro clicks on his communicator as he runs, "Suzume, we're inside. Get our weapons back to us."

"On it."

He slows, signaling for Saint to do the same as they get closer to the center of Spider's Lair. It's a mess of connected pathways, best traversed by an Elikśni. But he's a Hunter, built for swiftness and way-finding. Although he's never been in this part of the Lair before, he easily orients his location and leads them directly to Crow's room.

Usually, there'd be a high concentration of Elikśni in the area, but the halls are empty. *They must be down in the nightclub investigating the Stasis storm... Assuming that place has any sort of cameras, they'll be looking for them soon. Not a problem.*

Shiro darts across the last hall and into Crow's room. He's moving fast so that he can quickly silence the startled Guardian, but the room is empty. He stops dead in his tracks, Saint nearly knocking him over as he scrambles to stop.

"Crow?" He whispers with no response.

Oh no... Shiro tries to suppress his fears. He begins to search the perimeter, opening crates and sliding boxes out of the way. Saint does the same, starting from the other side of the room. They're tearing it apart to find potential hiding spots or any clues to where Crow could be if not here.

Shiro reaches the flat slab Crow uses as a bed, heart sinking. *It's surface is covered in a layer of dust...*

He looks at Saint, opening the comms to their Ghosts. "He's not here... Hasn't been..."

"What?!" Suzume's voice raises in shock.

Shiro begins to pace, mind racing. *Where else could he be?! Think!* Time was already ticking away. Too much longer and he'd be forced to leave Crow *again!*

In his head, he could still see Crow standing firm, refusing to follow even while his eyes filled with despair... *Crow knew the abuse he faced at Spider's hands wasn't right, but he couldn't leave without knowing he didn't have to come back... knowing the bomb was deactivated...*

What if Crow had changed his mind? What if he'd tried to follow them and the explosives detonated...

"Is his stuff still there? Maybe he was moved." Suzume pressed. "Shiro, *talk* to us!"

"Yeah, it's all here, but it hasn't been touched," *this was not good...* "Weeks at least..."

"Maybe it's just a long assignment? You don't know, Spider could've sent him on something..." Suzume's voice quieted. *She was thinking exactly what he was...*

"Check for Glint's signal," he stepped over to Crow's workbench, digging into the drawers for any clues.

"Already on it. I'm not getting anything."

"You check, too, Geppetto," Saint cuts into the shared comms, joining Shiro by the workbench.

"I am finding nothing as well..."

"So they're dead?" He pauses, tightening his grip on the drawer's handle.

"No, not exactly! This only means that they're not in range! They're likely still alive!" Suzume assures.

"Or Glint's shell was entirely destroyed," Geppetto adds.

"Nope, don't listen to that!" Suzume interjects. "That is incredibly unlikely! Even if Glint's shell was destroyed, we would be able to detect *something*! They're alive, just not here!"

"Most likely," Geppetto agrees.

"Could they still be on the Shore?" Shiro asks. *Inside the range of the explosives but outside the range of a Ghost's scanner.*

"Yes! So you both have to get back here now!"

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