

Regicide I

PoV: Sergeant Caelum Starhoard

“...and that’s six deca-calls in a row, baby!” Oka announced, flashing a wide, smug grin to the growing crowd that had gathered around Orange Squad’s table. His tone was dripping with self-satisfaction, as the marines surrounding him burst into a cacophony of voices, ranging from congratulatory cheers to grumbling disbelief.

Some were flat-out angry, tossing accusations of cheating across the table.

“That’s fucking bullshit; there’s no way, man!” Nora exclaimed from the other side of Oka, her eyes glued to the holographic screen in front of her, mouth slightly agape in disbelief. “Just... how?!”

Caelum shook his head, amusement tugging at his lips.

He’d seen Oka’s inexplicable streak of luck far too many times to be shocked by it anymore. Nora, on the other hand, should’ve known better. She’d been in Orange Squad for three years now and had witnessed Oka’s ridiculous fortune firsthand.

Betting against him in a game of chance was, frankly, a fool’s errand.

The banter continued, voices rising and falling around him, but Caelum tuned it all out. His focus drifted back to the data-pad in his hands, where the real action was unfolding.

The steady stream of information from the Recruit Assessment scrolled across the screen—a privilege granted to Orange Squad due to their month of ship-duty coinciding with the Recruits’ first Assessment.

Command had called it a “perk to tide over the boredom,” and Caelum, for one, was more than grateful for the distraction. Ship-duty month was notoriously uneventful, except for the rare Barrier-breach occurrences.

But given that Orange Squad had been assigned Deck C, Sector 64, they were guaranteed a month of monotonous shifts and routine patrols. This sector housed the main servers of the DDS, making it the most heavily fortified and secure part of the entire ship. The very design of the sector itself meant it was more fortress than deck, with multiple layers of security that made anything short of a full-scale invasion laughable.

While it had only been a week since the Assessment started, there had already been some *seriously* interesting developments, even within the first day. The fact that this was widely considered one of the hardest first-time assessments ever handed to new Recruits made it captivating enough to hold his attention.

Caelum, along with the rest of Orange Squad and their sister squad “Cups,” who had also gathered around Oka and Nora’s table, adding to the lively commotion, had been utterly fixated on their data-pads during the initial chaos and slaughter of the Nova Tertius landing.

Amidst the joking and chatter, the atmosphere had drastically shifted when the screens showed the deadly ambushes sprung by the Stellar Republic, aided by their local unintegrated forces.

He had spent hours since then mulling over the early phases of the assault, contemplating how *he* might have avoided the bloodbath if he had been in command. But as much as he racked his brain, he had to admit there wasn't much he could've done differently given the starting intel provided.

The ambushes had simply been too brutal, fast and somehow hidden from the UHF's orbital scans and intelligence network.

Most of his squadmates had spent the next few days loudly criticising the Legate in charge, declaring that such ambushes were "obvious" and that the commander was "seriously stupid" for leading his Marines into them.

But Caelum couldn't really blame them for their hindsight-based analysis.

They weren't trained to sift through intel in real time, to make high-stakes calls in the heat of battle with limited information. That was what set him apart from them; why he was the leader of the squad. They were specialists, focused on their specific roles in the field, while he had the mindset for leadership.

Take Oka, for example.

He wasn't leadership material—his tactical acumen left a lot to be desired—but his luck was nothing short of miraculous. The guy seemed Emperor-blessed, with a golden touch for anything chance-based, both on and off the battlefield.

Whether it was gambling or tossing a grenade into the heart of an enemy squad, Oka *never* missed.

In the four years Caelum had known him, since their early Recruit days, Oka had never misplaced a single grenade, or even a fragment of one. It didn't matter how chaotic or desperate the situation was—he *always* hit his mark.

Then there was Nora, their ace-shooter.

She had held several top rankings aboard the Monarch for her shooting accuracy over the past years and had proven her skill repeatedly on the various battlefields they'd encountered.

But the real reason Caelum had sought her out three years ago, when he was forming Orange Squad after their ascension to Tier 1, was her downright uncanny perception. Nora had an almost supernatural ability to pick out the right targets at *just* the right moment.

When facing the Stellar Republic and their armies of clones, Nora often managed to identify the Original—hidden among dozens of indistinguishable clones—with just a few shots.

This skill alone drastically sped up Orange Squad's progress, compared to other squads that relied on pure chance or trial-and-error to eliminate key enemies and break through defended positions.

Pair that with Oka's freakish luck, who had a habit of "accidentally" targeting the correct enemies more often than not, and Orange Squad had developed a reputation as the fastest squad in the field for dismantling Stellar Republic positions aboard the Monarch.

It was a point of pride for Caelum, and field commanders frequently capitalised on Orange Squad's speed and precision for high-priority missions.

His gaze then drifted to the last three members of Orange Squad—Kinuk, Iren, and Voldamiz—checking to ensure they weren't getting into any of their usual antics.

Kinuk was their offensive heavy, and easily the squad's most imposing figure—both in terms of size and sheer firepower. A man of few words, he let his massive rotary cannon, "Goliath," do most of the talking on the battlefield.

If Nora was the sniper who could pick off key targets with surgical precision, then Kinuk was the hammer that smashed through anything too tough for the rest of the squad to handle.

His specialty was *overwhelming* firepower and area denial.

Whenever a position needed to be cleared, or a horde of enemies suppressed, Kinuk stepped in, mowing down enemies with an abundance of oversized calibre bullets.

His naturally massive size and strength had only been amplified further by the System over the years, allowing him to carry more ammunition and heavier weapons than most offensive heavies, making him a walking tank who could hold his own even when things got ugly.

Especially because he was the only offensive heavy that Caelum knew of, that was wearing Ultra-Heavy Armour; the type usually exclusively favoured by Defensive Heavies.

While talking about Defensive Heavies, you never could get around Iren. She was the squad's defensive heavy and their most tactical thinker after Caelum.

Where Kinuk thrived in brute force and killing the enemy, Iren specialised in keeping the squad alive and the enemies out.

She wielded a massive kinetic-energy shield—that she had affectionately coined "Beauty"—that could absorb most types of firepower with ease, but her true talent lay in her ability to quickly assess a battlefield and set up defensive perimeters.

Iren could glance at a combat zone and within seconds know the best places to deploy cover, establish kill zones, or fortify a position. Her calm, level-headed approach made her the squad's anchor during chaotic firefights, always keeping them on the move while ensuring no one got overwhelmed by incoming fire.

And unlike many defensive heavies, she had a keen sense for when to go on the offensive as well, having not just one, but *three* different primary weapons to go alongside her

“Beauty”, that she employed more than effectively based on the situation they were presented with.

Caelum often let Iren handle the minutiae that was a firefight; while he focused more on the big picture orders and commands; that’s how crucial her tactical acumen was for the squad.

Lastly, there was Voldamiz, the squad’s tech specialist, though calling him just a “techie” didn’t really do justice to what he brought to the table. He was their battlefield engineer, the one responsible for deploying traps, hacking into enemy systems, and rigging explosives.

Voldamiz had a natural affinity for machines, explosives and thoroughly loved tinkering with them—often modifying his own equipment—and that of the rest of the squad—to squeeze out that extra bit of performance.

His real specialty, however, was sabotage and disruption.

Whether it was taking down enemy drones, disabling power grids, or setting up a minefield in a matter of seconds, Voldamiz had a knack for turning the tide of a battle by thoroughly controlling the environment. He wasn’t a front-line fighter like Kinuk or Iren, but when it came to outsmarting the enemy and making their lives hell, Voldamiz was unmatched.

In Caelum’s eyes, Iren and Voldamiz formed the backbone of the squad, having single-handedly turned the tide in more than a few critical situations. Their combined tactical acumen, paired with Voldamiz’s unmatched ability to create truly unethical levels of chaos and disrupt battlefield manoeuvrability, had saved Orange Squad on countless occasions.

Together, they made sure the enemy’s every move was countered and their battlefield turned into a trap, ensuring the squad always had the upper hand. In fact, the collective efforts of every member had contributed significantly to Orange Squad’s current ranking—fourth overall on the Monarch, a position they held with pride.

Their sister squad they were on ship duty with, Cups, wasn’t far behind, ranked twelfth, which was impressive considering the sheer number of squads aboard the Monarch.

Caelum allowed himself a brief smile at the thought, but soon returned his focus to the data-pad in his hands. The assessment data was far too interesting to ignore.

His eyes narrowed as he caught a glimpse of a particular encounter detailed in the report—an engagement between the Monarch’s Alpha Squad and two enemy squads of Stellar Republic soldiers.

The skirmish had taken place while Alpha Squad was en route to the eastern front.

Together, the entire squad’s combined ingenuity and teamwork ensured that Orange Squad maintained its reputation as a force to be reckoned with.

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The data highlighted the sheer intensity of the encounter; two full squads of enemy soldiers had attempted to intercept Alpha Squad, aiming to cut off their advance. The numbers alone painted a daunting picture—two full-size enemy squads against just one squad of freshly minted Recruits.

It was meant to be a lethal ambush, an overwhelming force that should have made it impossible for the squad to push through. Despite being outnumbered, however, Alpha Squad had managed to surprisingly easily hold their ground, their inherent talent and raw Attributes making the majority of the difference.

The footage attached to the report showed them moving with the raw instinct of seasoned Marines, their lack of coordination hardly noticeable under the weight of their pure individual skill. Though their coordination was still lacking, considering they had only been a squad for about a week, the raw talent of each member had carried them through, proving too much for the opposition to handle.

Caelum had watched the enemy trying to adapt, attempting to push Alpha Squad back through sheer force and an overabundance of clones, but their efforts ultimately proved to be in vain. The individual prowess of Alpha Squad members had simply overwhelmed the attackers, pushing them into disarray.

Only two casualties had been recorded on Alpha Squad's side, none critical, which was truly remarkable considering the circumstances of the ambush itself.

Caelum couldn't help but feel a surge of respect at seeing the attached recording.

He still remembered the Alpha Squad of his own Recruit phase and how mythical they had seemed at the time; the kind of squad you could only dream of emulating. But watching these new Recruits, he felt like this recruitment drive's Alpha Squads, not just from the Monarch, but from all of the recruitment ships in the Assessment, were a clear cut above even his own memory.

They seemed sharper, faster, and even more talented than the Alpha Squads of his time.

Early on he, and the rest of the squads, had been particularly fascinated with the Alpha Squad of the Sovereign; their last stand on the first day of the landing that had claimed the majority of their squad had become a bit of a legendary thing to reference in Orange and Cups Squads.

The footage of that battle was practically required viewing for any Marine wanting to understand what true determination looked like in his eyes. Even Kinuk himself had spoken up, one of the rare occasions where the hulking monster of a man took word out of his own initiative, to compliment Sovereign Alpha's Offensive Heavy on her truly heroic charge.

The memory of Kinuk's gruff voice praising the sheer bravery of that marine stuck with Caelum—it was not every day Kinuk acknowledged someone else's strength. While the enemies she had fought had “only” been unintegrated soldiers, she had still been massively outnumbered to the point that even Caelum had doubted that Kinuk himself would have made it out of that situation alive.

That said, Caelum had primarily been following his own ship's Alpha Squad, as they were bound to be among the most important up-and-coming Marines to keep an eye on for his own squad's future.

Whether he would try to recruit them to it or simply come up with countermeasures against them for the yearly inter-squad tournaments, he wasn't sure of yet; but either way, he would need detailed intel on them, one way or another.

“Anything good, sarge?” Iren's voice broke him out of his reverie.

Caelum glanced up, meeting her gaze before giving a quick nod and handing over the data-pad. The shorthand summary of the engagement he had just been reviewing blinked on the screen, the stark numbers and tactical breakdowns painting a clear picture of the unfolding chaos.

“Yeah, Alpha Squad is putting in some serious work,” he explained, leaning back in his chair and stretching for a moment. His muscles protested, stiff from the hours spent pouring over reports. “As expected, really. The current Alpha Squads are truly terrifying. I'd love to avoid having to go up against them in future tournaments, but I doubt we'll get that lucky.”

Iren let out a low whistle as she skimmed through the data, her eyes darting back and forth across the screen. Her eyebrows lifted in appreciation of the carnage Alpha Squad had wrought.

“No kidding, eh? If nothing else, it'll be fun. And that's what matters, right?” She flashed him a playful grin, hitting him with her characteristic wink before casually tossing the pad back across the table.

Without waiting for his response, Iren kicked her feet up onto the table, the poor piece of furniture creaking and aching under the weight of her ultra-heavy armour, as she lounged back in the chair with the kind of ease that Caelum had grown accustomed to over the past three years.

Despite his best efforts to instil some sense of propriety in his squad's defensive heavy, she remained blissfully indifferent to the idea of manners. If anything, her rebellious streak only seemed to grow with time.

Caelum couldn't help but roll his eyes, though he knew it was futile to press the issue any further. Iren was as good as they came on the battlefield, and if her lack of table manners was the price for her skill, well... it was one he was more than willing to pay.

"Fun... I definitely think it'll be that, yeah," he replied, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he imagined squaring off against the Alpha Squads at their peak. There was a certain thrill in learning tactics and strategy directly from those who seemed born to them. "I honestly can't wait—even if we're likely to lose our rank on the squad rankings once the Alpha and Beta squads move up."

A snort echoed from the opposite side of the table, pulling his attention back to Iren. She leaned back in her chair, arms crossed, and a smug grin stretched across her face.

"What makes you think *that* nonsense, sarge?" she challenged, her voice brimming with cocky confidence. With a casual flick of her hand, she pulled a small cracker from one of the countless pockets on her armour, popping it into her mouth. The crunch echoed in the room as she chewed, never losing the smug grin plastered on her face. "It's really simple: All we have to do is rank up *before* they ascend. Then, when they inevitably knock us down a notch or two, we'll end up right where we started—no harm done."

Her grin stretched even wider, as if she'd just unveiled a flawless master plan. Caelum couldn't help but shake his head, this time with a chuckle, amused by her ever-present and truly unshakable confidence.

"All jokes aside though," Iren continued, her tone shifting to one of deadly seriousness. She leaned forward, the playful glint in her eyes now replaced with a sharp focus. "That assessment the current Recruits were given is... something else. I honestly don't see how they're supposed to handle anything in there, even with their better-than-average starting position and undeniable talent. You've gone over the assessment briefing more than I have; just what is the brass thinking, sending them into Nova Tertius...?"

Caelum appreciated moments like this—deep tactical discussions with Iren. It was one of the few times he could really dig into strategy without dumbing it down for others. He paused, gathering his thoughts, wanting to provide a measured response.

"I think they're desperate," he said carefully, watching as Iren raised an eyebrow, signalling him to elaborate. "Desperate for something—*anything*—that might change the course of this war. We've all seen how things have been spiralling in recent years, and with the Emperor's deadline looming closer... They *need* a breakthrough. The fact that the latest Recruitment Drive turned out some incredibly impressive Marines, and even more impressive Alpha Squads, probably lit a fire under the brass. They see potential."

He leaned back in his chair, letting the weight of his words sink in. "I think they're pushing these Recruits hard right from the start, hoping to force growth. And not just for personal development—there's probably a gamble involved, hoping the System churns out good rewards for them facing impossible odds."

Iren nodded, though her expression remained doubtful. Caelum continued, acknowledging her concerns. "But yeah, I get it. If we'd been given this same assessment back when we

started? No way. We'd have been stuck from the get-go, with no way out of that hole in terms of progression. Honestly, I feel for the average Marines, especially the ones who don't stand out. This kind of pressure could crush them. But I think the brass calculated those risks—they're willing to sacrifice the bottom third, maybe even cripple some average recruits, if it means pushing the top-tier Marines to their limits and getting the best rewards they can."

He shook his head, his voice carrying a quiet frustration as the harsh reality of the situation gnawed at him, "It's a cold strategy, but it's what they've decided is necessary... And honestly, I can't exactly blame them for it. We *do* need something to shake things up. The way things are headed, the UHF won't even make it into the upper half by the time the deadline hits—let alone be anywhere near the top."

Iren leaned back in her chair, her eyes narrowing as she mulled over Caelum's words.

She tapped her fingers thoughtfully on the table's edge, her characteristic, cocky grin nowhere to be seen. For a moment, she seemed almost distant, as if weighing the cold logic behind the strategy.

"Yeah, I get it," Iren finally said, her voice quieter than usual, almost reluctant. She leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees, her gaze fixed on the floor. "It makes sense when you see it from their perspective, I guess. Sacrifice a few to take a shot at something bigger. But damn..." She shook her head, her brows knitting together in frustration. "It's brutal. They're not just playing with the bottom Recruits' lives either—they're gambling with everyone's. If they've miscalculated even a little, the top squads could get wiped out in Nova Tertius. And if that happens, their progression will be crippled."

She paused, rubbing the back of her neck, the tension in her shoulders clear. "The first assessment's critical—it sets the tone for the whole year. Getting the necessary Merit and Credits from it to fuel the progression for the next quarter is crucial. If they don't succeed..."

Iren let out a slow, heavy breath, her fingers curling into a tight fist as if trying to contain the frustration bubbling beneath the surface. "I just really hope the brass knows what they're doing. Because if they don't? We're *all* screwed. Losing this Recruitment Drive, of all the drives we could lose, to something as easy to avoid as a progression hole, would frankly be *catastrophic*."

Caelum nodded slowly, absorbing Iren's words.

"You're right," he said, his tone thoughtful. "*If* the brass miscalculated, the fallout would be devastating. But..." He hesitated for a moment, considering his next words carefully. "I think you might still be underestimating the Alpha Squads from this Recruitment Drive. I mean, we're talking about squads like *Empyrean Alpha*—with all of their Recruits being from core worlds exclusively, they're bound to have a ton of legacies with serious pedigree. And then there's our own *Monarch Alpha*—you've seen them in action yourself these past two weeks aboard the ship. They've already proven they know how to handle themselves."

He leaned in slightly, his voice lowering as if to emphasise his point. "And then there's of course *Sovereign Alpha*... the highest PV Recruit squad the UHF has *ever* had. They're

breaking records left and right without even really trying. If anyone's going to survive Nova Tertius, it's this lineup of Alpha Squads. They might even—"

Suddenly, an ear-splitting alarm blared through the room, cutting Caelum off mid-sentence.

The sound was deafening, reverberating through the walls, drowning out everything else.

His eyes immediately snapped to Iren's, widened as the implications of the alarm blaring sent ice through his veins, and for a split second, neither of them moved, instincts kicking in as the tension shifted from conversation to action.

Without a word, they both jumped from their chairs.

Iren's hand went straight for her sidearm as she sprinted towards the nearby wall where she had left her kinetic-energy shield and her primary weapons, while Caelum reached for his rifle that was leaning against the table on his side.

Around them, the rest of Orange Squad and Cups Squad sprang into action as well, leaping from their seats, hands scrambling for weapons, the casual atmosphere of the room completely shattered.

"Group up on my position," Caelum ordered through his squad comms, his voice calm but urgent. He heaved the massive plasteel table over with a grunt, creating a makeshift barrier for momentary cover.

The sound of metal scraping against the floor was drowned out by the blaring alarm, but the barrier would buy them time if an enemy happened to appear right away.

"Highest priority is keeping the gate to the DDS server room clear of any potential enemies. Voldamiz, set up your gadgets around there—full lethality. We can't afford to mess around."

His tone hardened as he glanced at Iren across the room. "Iren, cover him. Oka, Kinuk, you're with me. I want eyes in every direction."

The soft, rapid beeps of his squad members confirming their orders buzzed in his ear, a comforting rhythm amidst the tension. Without missing a beat, Caelum switched to the squad leader channel and addressed Corporal Fariz, the leader of Cups Squad.

"Corporal, reinforce our perimeter. Tell your men to stay far away from the server room gate—one of my guys is rigging explosives there. We don't know what's coming, so I want every angle covered. Prepare for the worst."

As he spoke, Caelum's hands moved almost automatically, checking his rifle.

He felt the familiar weight as he slid a fresh mag into place, disengaged the safety, and aligned the sights. Everything was perfect—just as it always was—but in moments like this, he didn't take any chances.

Before Fariz could respond, Caelum added, “Also, inform your men this is going to get ugly. Whatever triggered this alarm isn’t going to back down easily. No holding back—100% effort, Fariz. We can’t afford to miss because someone hesitated.”

“Understood,” Corporal Fariz replied, already barking orders to his squad.

With the immediate commands issued, Caelum switched to a private channel, directly addressing the ship’s AI. Sometimes, simplifying things for the squad kept them focused, but he needed answers—and fast.

“Monarch, give me the rundown: What’s happening?” Caelum asked, his voice clipped and tense as his eyes swept the room for any sudden movement. His gaze quickly locked onto the large open gate that led into the nearest hallway—the only available entrance into the room they were defending right now.

Cups Squad moved quickly into position, their Defensive Heavy leading the charge.

With a grunt, he slammed his full-cover shield down in front of the open gate, the heavy plate angling toward the opening before he engaged its grav-lock, securing it firmly in place.

The rest of Cups Squad followed suit, quickly manning two of the stationary cannons that had been positioned toward the gate. They took cover behind the embrasures built into the walls of the room—designed for scenarios just like this—peeking out only enough to monitor the entrance.

The open gate had a perfectly symmetrical sibling on the opposite side of the room, though that one was locked tight. Both were part of the room’s defensive design. The DDS server room was far too critical to leave anything to chance.

Even with the shield, embrasure and cannons, the team knew the gate would be the focal point of any attack—they had to be ready for whatever came through.

The six auto-turrets mounted within the room had also whirred to life, their sensors lighting up as they scanned the biometrics of everyone present. Caelum could hear the faint hum as the turrets calibrated, primed to fire in an instant.

They were programmed to take out anything that didn’t match the correct biomarker signatures, and their reaction time was nearly instantaneous.

Anyone or anything unauthorised would be obliterated before it could realise they had entered a room full of auto-turrets.

“We have encountered an anomaly within the Void,” the Monarch reported, its response swift and precise. Caelum’s pulse quickened as the AI continued. “The Repulsor-Field has sustained a hit to its integrity, approximately 14.7% across the entire ship.”

Caelum’s jaw clenched.

A 14.7% compromise in the Repulsor-Field was no minor issue—it was enough to let *something* through. He could already picture the chaos spreading throughout the ship. There were bound to be at least a few Barrier-Breach events already.

“I have issued a Code Orange ship-wide; a complement of Lieutenants is en route to your position as we speak. Additionally, I am pulling the Majors from the DDS to reinforce the Marines aboard in preparation for any further—”

The Monarch’s voice abruptly cut off as the entire room plunged into pitch-black darkness.

Caelum’s breath hitched, and for a heartbeat, all was silent and still.

Then, with a reflex ingrained in every Marine present, flashlights mounted on their armour and weapons snapped on, beams of light slicing through the heavy blackness. The narrow circles of illumination darted across the room, sweeping over every corner, every shadow, as the squad shifted into a more defensive stance.

Every muscle tensed, every breath held, waiting for the next move.

A few seconds later, the red emergency lights flickered on, casting the room in an ominous, blood-like hue, giving them just enough to see but not enough to ease the growing tension.

Monarch’s voice returned, now carrying a strained, almost distorted edge. “Multiple Barrier-Breaches have occurred. Hostile forces are engaging Marines in more than a dozen sectors. The Repulsor-Field in Sector 64 is under considerable stress but remains intact for now. Captain Diaz is en route to your location to secure the DDS Server Room against potential hostiles.”

Caelum’s pulse quickened, his grip tightening around his rifle. The tension in his chest grew heavier with each passing second.

Sector 64 under stress, breaches across the ship—the situation was spiralling out of control, and fast.

The fact that even Captain Diaz had been pulled from the DDS and was en route to his position didn’t bring him any comfort; in fact, it had the opposite effect. If the ship’s AI deemed it necessary to send the most powerful combatant aboard to reinforce them, just how bad were the incoming threats? What kind of enemies were they about to face?

He barely had time to process Monarch’s latest update before the AI’s voice continued.

“The Repulsor-Field across the ship is experiencing uncharacteristic stresses—”

Suddenly, the AI’s voice warped into static, garbled and incomprehensible.

Then, just as quickly, it cut off entirely.

The room was plunged into absolute darkness, the emergency power failing as the hum of the ship’s systems fell silent. A heartbeat later, a violent jolt ripped through the ship, as if it

had been struck by a massive unseen force, sending the entire room into utter pandemonium.

Caelum's instincts kicked in just in time—he slammed his boots into the floor, activating the magnetic clasps just in time.

The force of the ship's sudden shift still yanked him from his stance, however, but he managed to stay grounded, slamming brutally onto the floor instead of flying through the room like the others.

Around him, plasteel furniture, equipment, and even bodies were flung across the room as the abrupt change in velocity caught up with everything present.

Caelum's eyes widened in horror as his helmet's flashlight beam swung wildly across the chaos, landing on a gruesome sight.

The table he had used for cover earlier was airborne, rocketing across the room before colliding with a member of Cups Squad. The impact was sickening—a deafening crunch echoed as the marine was flattened against the wall like a swatted fly, armour plates shattering and blood splattering from the crushed body.

The flashlight caught the horrific moment, illuminating the grotesque scene in a stark, unforgiving light. His stomach twisted in horror, but there was no time to dwell on it. Cries of agony rang out from around him, cutting through the chaos, and instinct took over.

Caelum sprinted toward the nearest injured Marines, his focus narrowing as he shifted into survival mode. His role as squad leader and medic overlapped now, both responsibilities weighing heavily on his shoulders. He barked orders through the comms as he moved, his voice sharp and commanding over the sounds of panic.

"Orange Squad, status reports—*now!*" he called, his voice rising above the noise. "Is everyone mobile? Voldamiz, did you get your gadgets set before the power cut?"

He didn't wait for a response, his boots thudding heavily against the floor as he reached Kinuk's body. The squad's Offensive Heavy lay crumpled on the ground, groaning in pain, but still alive.

Caelum dropped to his knees beside him, quickly checking for any fractures or severe injuries. His fingers moved with practised precision, examining Kinuk's limbs and torso.

His armour had taken a beating, but it had held and taken the majority of the impact.

"Hang in there, Kinuk," Caelum muttered under his breath, already pulling out a series of injectors from his kit. He administered a mixture of painkillers, stimulants, and coagulants into the Heavy's neck-port, the hiss of the injections barely audible over the chaos.

Kinuk groaned again, his muscles tensing as the drugs worked their way through his system, rapidly dulling the pain and kick-starting his recovery.

Caelum gave his arm a reassuring squeeze before turning back to his comms.

"Voldamiz, status on those gadgets!" Caelum demanded, his eyes darting around the room to assess the rest of his squad.

He had to keep them moving—there was no time for hesitation, not with the ship in this state.

Every second mattered, and the threat they were preparing for was undoubtedly still on its way.

"I'm mobile," came Iren's strained voice over the comms. Caelum exhaled in relief, but the breath caught in his throat when she continued. "Voldamiz is dead. He managed to put down his gadgets before everything shut off, though."

For a split second, Caelum froze.

The weight of the news hit him like a punch to the gut—Voldamiz, gone just like that.

But he couldn't afford to stay in that moment. His mind snapped back to the task at hand—he still had others to check on, Nora and Oka among them.

"*Fuck*," Oka's voice cut through the comms next. "I'm mostly unharmed—was right next to a wall when this shit happened."

Caelum quickly redirected his focus toward Nora.

As he moved, he spotted one of Cups Squad's members sprawled nearby, barely conscious.

Without breaking stride, he administered a quick burst of auto-injectors to stabilise them before continuing his search.

Finally, he caught sight of Nora's sleek, dark-grey armour splayed out near the westernmost wall. His heart skipped a beat as he sprinted toward her.

"Nora, come in!" he called over the comms, his voice growing more urgent with each step.

He tried again, then again, but no response.

The clank of his boots echoed through the room and in his own ears like massive bells, as he kept his magnetic locks engaged, just in case the ship decided to lurch again.

Caelum reached Nora in seconds, dropping to one knee beside her prone form. He immediately began checking her vitals, hands moving quickly as he assessed her condition.

Much to his elation, her breathing was shallow but steady.

Her armour had taken the brunt of the impacts, but nothing fatal managed to get through.

He quickly applied a stim and pain injector, hoping to bring her back to consciousness.

"Come on, Nora. Stay with me," Caelum muttered under his breath, his eyes darting over her body as he scanned for any further injuries. His HUD displayed more than just a few broken

bones—some of her internal organs showed minor ruptures, and there were deep tissue contusions scattered across her torso.

It was bad, but not immediately fatal. She had a fighting chance.

He applied more stabilisers, carefully injecting them into the key points of her armour to get her back on her feet—or at least conscious.

As he continued administering first-aid, he tuned back into the squad-leader comms, his voice steady despite the chaos around him. “Fariz, we’re down one; one heavily injured, two mobile, and two mostly unharmed. I gave one of your guys some stims on my way to Nora—they should be up soon. Status on the rest of Cups?”

He glanced at Nora’s faceplate, waiting for any sign that the injectors were kicking in.

Her breathing was still shallow, but her vitals showed improvement, giving him a small sense of relief. He adjusted her position slightly, ensuring she wouldn’t be jostled if the ship lurched again, his own muscles tense with the memory of the earlier shockwave.

As Fariz’s strained voice came through the comms, Caelum listened carefully.

“We lost two,” Fariz reported, his voice barely masking the pain beneath. “But the rest of us are essentially unharmed barring some serious bruising. We were all close to the embrasures and walls when the ship lurched, so we got lucky. We’ve got eyes peeled on the gate, no movement yet. You have any idea what the actual fuck is going on?”

Caelum let out a slow breath, steadying himself as he continued checking Nora’s vitals.

“Yeah, I’ve got some intel from the Monarch,” he replied, keeping his tone calm but firm. “Barrier-Breaches are happening all over the ship. Supposedly some kind of anomaly out in the Void that hit the Repulsor-Field hard; no idea what that means. But the ship’s taking damage, and fighting has already broken out in more than a dozen sectors. Multiple Lieutenants, Majors, and even Captain Diaz herself are en route to reinforce us. We’ll just have to hold until they arrive.”

He glanced at the gate, his gut twisting with unease. “Stay at the highest level of alertness. We can’t afford to let our guard down. We’re in for a fight, but I don’t know what to expect.”

Fariz was silent for a moment, then came back over the comms. “Understood. We’ll hold the gate. How much time do you need to get your squad back up?”

Caelum quickly scanned the room, then back to Nora, whose vitals were stabilising but still needed more time. “Give me another minute or two. Orange Squad’s almost ready to go. I’ll send Iren and Kinuk your way; the rest of us will back you up as soon as we’re on our feet again.”

“Got it,” Fariz responded. “We’ll keep things locked down till you’re good.”

Caelum’s jaw tightened as he refocused on Nora.

He couldn't shake the feeling that asking for two minutes was already pushing his luck.

His gut, honed by years of experience, told him that whatever was coming wasn't going to wait that long to hit them. Time was slipping through his fingers, and the situation was bound to get worse before it got better.

Still, he forced himself to lower back down beside Nora, his hands working with quick, efficient movements as he continued treating her injuries in whatever way he could under the circumstances. The bruising on her side, the ruptures in her organs—they were all bad, but none of it mattered right now.

They *needed* her on her feet, and fast.

Caelum grimaced, knowing the risk as he prepared another cocktail of stims.

The amount he'd already administered was pushing her system to its limits, and he knew the medium-term damage of any more could be significant. But he didn't have the luxury of thinking longer-term like that. If they had any hope of protecting the DDS, Nora *needed* to be functional—and that meant back on her feet, pain or no pain.

He injected the mix into her neck, the hiss of the stim delivery a familiar sound.

"Come on, Nora," he muttered under his breath. "I need you up. We *all* need you up for this."

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, with a sudden, violent jolt, Nora's body convulsed as the cocktail of stims and adrenaline surged through her veins, yanking her back from unconsciousness.

Her eyes snapped open, wide and unfocused, darting around as if she didn't fully register where she was. Caelum grabbed her shoulder firmly, steadying her as her breathing quickened, fighting through the grogginess. "Nora, it's me. You're okay. *Focus.*"

It took a few moments, but her gaze finally locked on Caelum, the fog clearing as awareness settled in. She blinked, her face scrunching in pain and confusion, before the situation started to click into place. "Caelum..." she rasped, her voice hoarse. "Where's my gun?"

"Let's get you up first," Caelum said, hooking his arm under her shoulder and helping her to her feet. Nora wobbled, her legs shaky and unsteady, but she gritted her teeth, leaning into him for support as she fought to stay upright. He glanced around, quickly spotting her rifle a few feet away, half-buried under some fallen debris.

With a quick grab, he retrieved the gun and handed it to her. She clutched it tightly, though her grip was still weak.

"Come on, over here," he said, guiding her toward a fallen piece of plasteel furniture, that had at one point likely been a chair, which had tumbled over when the ship lurched. He helped her lean against it, using it as both cover and a stabiliser to keep her upright.

Nora's breath was still laboured, her body protesting against the stims forcing it to function, but her eyes were sharp now, her focus returning.

"What the fuck is going on here, sarge?" she asked, her voice steadier, though she winced with every movement.

Caelum crouched next to her, keeping his eyes on the gate. "Some kind of anomaly hit the ship. Barrier-Breaches all over. We've got hostiles engaging Marines in multiple sectors. Lieutenants and Majors are en route to reinforce us. *Captain Diaz* is coming too." He paused, locking eyes with her. "We don't know *what's* coming, but we need to be ready for anything."

Nora nodded grimly, adjusting her grip on the rifle as she tried to steady her breathing.

"Got it. Let's do this." Despite the pain etched across her face, there was a fierce determination in Nora's eyes. She was as ready to fight as any of them now, her rifle steady in her hands despite the strain on her body.

Caelum felt a surge of relief, knowing he had finally gotten the last member of Orange Squad back on her feet. With Nora stabilised and ready for whatever was coming, he activated the squad leader comms once again.

"Fariz, Orange Squad is back up. We're ready on our end," he reported, glancing toward the gate, tension still thrumming in his chest. "You guys seen anything yet?"

He scanned the room as he waited for a response, his eyes darting between the hastily constructed cover and the foreboding silence beyond the gate.

The Marines inside the room had their rifles trained on the entrance, the beams of their flashlights cutting through the darkness, illuminating the gate from half a dozen different angles. Every marine was visibly tense that he saw, their bodies coiled like springs, ready to respond to whatever might come through.

While their armours came equipped with night-vision modules by default, protocol dictated the use of flashlights in situations like this. The emergency lights or even the main power could flicker back on at any moment, and using night-vision at the wrong time would leave them temporarily blinded, a critical risk they couldn't afford. The flashlights offered a compromise—visibility without the risk of sudden light disorienting them.

Caelum waited for a response, but after several tense moments, his comms remained silent.

A knot of unease tightened in his chest. He furrowed his brow, glancing toward the gate, but still nothing stirred. He repeated his inquiry, his voice a little sharper now, tinged with urgency.

"*Fariz*, come in. What's your status? You guys see anything?"

Still no answer.

His grip tightened on his rifle, and a sliver of dread began creeping into his mind. He swept his flashlight across the room, searching for Fariz amongst the members of Cups Squad.

The beam of light cut through the pitch-black darkness, slicing through the shadows that filled every corner, trying to find the squad leader of Cups.

“Fariz,” he called out again, trying to maintain his calm as he methodically scanned the room.

The beams from other Marines’ flashlights flickered across the space, creating brief flashes of overlapping cones, but he couldn’t pick out Fariz’s position. He directed his own light toward where he had last seen the leader of Cups Squad and where they had set up near the gate, his heart thudding in his chest.

If something had gone wrong, if they’d been hit without even as much as a sound—

He forced himself to stop thinking about the worst-case scenario, focusing instead on locating Fariz. The silence felt thick and unnatural, broken only by the faint hum of the emergency systems and the pounding of his pulse in his ears.

His flashlight swept methodically across the room, casting sharp beams of light over the darkened space.

Then, finally, he spotted Fariz.

The Corporal’s weapon was trained on the open gate, just like the rest of his squad.

They were alert, scanning for any threats, but there was no sign that Fariz had heard any of Caelum’s calls. No acknowledgment, no movement.

It was as if Caelum’s messages hadn’t reached him at all.

Caelum furrowed his brow, the knot of unease in his stomach tightening. Fariz was acting exactly as he should be, but the lack of response was troubling.

He quickly toggled his squad comms, his voice tight with urgency.

“Orange Squad, come in,” he called, hoping to determine whether the comms issue was isolated or widespread. His heart pounded as the seconds dragged by in silence.

When no response came he took a few quick steps toward Nora, who was still leaning against the plasteel for support.

“Comms are down,” he said, keeping his voice low but steady. “I don’t know for how long, but it can’t have been more than a minute or two. Switch to visual messaging.”

Nora nodded, her expression serious.

Without hesitation, she activated the light strips embedded in her armour’s gloves, the thin seams of light illuminating the edges of her fingers. The glow provided a simple yet effective signal method in the low-light conditions.

Caelum activated the light strips on his gloves, the soft glow flaring to life, ready for silent communication. He turned back toward where he knew Fariz and Cups Squad were stationed, toggling his flashlight on and off to catch the other squad leader's attention.

Fariz turned toward him, his silhouette briefly outlined by the rest of the light cones of Cups Squad. Caelum quickly signalled with his gloved hands, the light strips providing the necessary outlines for Fariz to see his fingers, "Comms down. Orange Squad OK."

Fariz nodded, his own hands becoming visible as the strips on his armour lit up. He responded with steady motions, "Roger. No movement here."

A small amount of relief washed over Caelum—at least both squads were still operational. But the stillness around them felt unnaturally heavy, as if the very air itself was bracing for something to happen.

Turning toward the rest of his squad, Caelum used the same method to catch their attention, flashing his light on and off. Once he had their focus, he signalled the comms outage.

Kinuk, Iren, and Oka responded in the affirmative, each activating their own light strips in acknowledgment. The soft glow from their palms flickered briefly in the darkened room, a quiet confirmation that everyone was on the same page.

With visual communication tentatively restored, Caelum turned his attention back to Nora.

He moved quickly, helping her shift closer to the rest of the squad. She leaned on him for support, still unsteady but determined to not be a burden, as they made their way from cover to cover. All the while, Caelum kept his eyes locked on the gate, the tension winding tighter in his chest.

'This is taking too long... It's been silent for far too fucking long. Where is the closest Barrier-Breach?' Caelum's mind raced, cycling through possibilities, trying to make sense of why nothing had happened yet.

The tension was unbearable, the eerie, utter silence inside the room pressing down on him like a physical weight, amplifying the pressure to figure out what was going on.

He shifted uneasily, his fingers tightening around his rifle as his thoughts spun. *'The Monarch reported dozens of Barrier-Breaches minutes ago, and things only got worse after that... So where are the enemies?'*

Every second of quiet gnawed at him, pushing his anxiety higher. It didn't make sense—there should've been movement, *some* sign of the breach by now. His mind churned through scenarios: *Were they waiting for something? Were the breaches further off than Monarch predicted? Had the reinforcements already arrived and were fighting just a few hallways away?*

None of it felt right, and the uncertainty only made the room feel more suffocating to him, the silence dragging out endlessly as he waited for what felt like the inevitable to happen.

As he continuously scanned the room, his eyes finally caught something strange—a flashlight beam, erratic and flickering.

One of Cups Squad's lights was darting across the room in sharp, random patterns, sweeping across the floor, up the walls, and back again. It was frantic, unfocused, like the Marine wielding it was desperately searching for something.

Caelum's brow furrowed.

He watched from a distance as Fariz noticed the same thing. The Cups Squad leader moved cautiously toward his teammate, gesturing to get their attention but clearly failing.

The light didn't stop its erratic dance, even as Fariz reached out, placing a hand on the Marine's shoulder—only for the Marine to startle, raising his rifle at Fariz' head, but the squad leader instinctively pushed it aside before anything more drastic could happen.

Fariz exchanged a few silent words with his squad member.

Then, after a moment, he looked up, his head turning towards Caelum from across the room.

Fariz raised his hand and began signalling, his movements tense and quick.

Something was wrong and Fariz wanted him to take a look.

Caelum felt his stomach twist with unease.

He whispered to Nora, "I'll be right back," before slipping out from behind cover and making his way toward Fariz. His mag-locked boots clanked over the floor with loud echoing noises, yet the sound of his own heartbeat drumming in his ears drowned out the noise entirely.

His flashlight beam cut a thin path through the dark, the lights casting long, dancing shadows across the room.

As he approached, he could see the Marine up close now—the flashlight still jerking wildly in his hand, as if he were searching desperately for something that wasn't there.

The Marine's breathing was uneven, his movements jittery, his head snapping from side to side like he couldn't focus.

Fariz shot Caelum a grim look as he reached them, his hand signals quick and sharp: *He's hearing something, but no one else can.*

Caelum's pulse quickened. He stepped up next to the Marine, watching as the flashlight continued to sway back and forth, too fast, too erratic.

"What's going on?" Caelum asked quietly, his voice low, trying not to startle the Marine.

The soldier's head whipped toward Caelum, his eyes wide and bloodshot behind the visor of his helmet.

“There’s... There’s something *in here*. It’s with us,” the Marine whispered, his voice barely above a breath. “I keep hearing it. Whispers. Can’t you hear them? They’re close... they’re watching us...”

A chill ran down Caelum’s spine.

He exchanged a look with Fariz, who shook his head subtly, indicating that neither he nor the rest of his squad had heard anything. Caelum frowned, feeling the air around them grow even thicker, more oppressive than before.

The Marine’s breathing became more erratic, his flashlight jerking faster now, as though he was trying to illuminate something lurking just out of reach.

The feeling of being watched crept over Caelum, and he couldn’t shake the growing sensation that something was very, *very* wrong.

“Stay calm,” he whispered to the Marine, even as his own nerves were starting to fray. His eyes darted around the room as well now, scanning every shadow, every corner the light touched.

But there was nothing.

Yet the silence was *too* perfect, *too* still.

It felt *alive*.

Like it was just waiting for them to notice something they hadn’t yet.

Suddenly, the Marine’s flashlight flickered and went out. The Marine gasped, his hand shaking as he tried to reignite the light, but it stayed dead.

“*It’s here*,” the Marine whispered again, his voice shaking, his eyes wide with fear as if he could see something lurking just beyond the edge of the light.

Caelum’s eyes flicked to Fariz, whose flashlight remained steady, but his face was tight with tension. Something was definitely wrong—*they* could all feel it now—but there was no sign of an actual threat, no movement, no sound.

Just that unbearable, crushing silence hanging over them like a lead weight.

Suddenly, the oppressive stillness was shattered by a harsh, static-laced screech that erupted from the speakers embedded in the walls and ceiling. The sound was deafening, grating, like broken glass being dragged across metal.

Caelum flinched, his pulse spiking as the unexpected noise ripped through the room. The already panicked Marine in front of him jerked violently, his finger twitching toward the trigger of his rifle.

"Easy!" Caelum hissed, moving fast.

He grabbed the Marine's arm, yanking the rifle away before the man could start firing blindly into the room. The Marine's eyes were wild, his breathing rapid and shallow as he tried to shake Caelum off, his body trembling with barely contained panic.

The static continued to sputter through the speakers, garbled and disjointed, before a voice emerged from the distortion—a voice Caelum recognized immediately, though it was warped beyond normal comprehension.

It was the Monarch, but it sounded nothing like its usual calm, mechanical tone.

Instead, it was *panicked*—distorted, frantic, as though even the ship's AI was struggling to process whatever was happening.

“...Danger...Breach... Protect... Server... All Costs...” The words were broken, almost unintelligible, and then the voice cut out abruptly, leaving them in the quiet darkness once again.

The silence that followed was even worse than before.

The static had felt like a shockwave, and now the room seemed to hold its breath, waiting for something—*anything*—to happen. The Marine Caelum had disarmed was shaking, but otherwise downright catatonic.

Fariz's eyes met Caelum's, his expression grim.

Whatever had just happened, it confirmed one thing: *They were in immediate danger.*

Then, breaking through the tense silence, the panicked Marine beside Caelum spoke again, his voice eerily flat, almost devoid of emotion. “Why did everyone turn off their lights? Why is it so dark...?”

Caelum's heart skipped a beat, his pulse quickening as he whipped his gaze back to the Marine.

The man stood bathed in light—both Caelum's and Fariz's flashlights were trained on him, casting long shadows across the floor, while the other Marines still had their beams fixed on the gate. The room was far from truly dark, yet the Marine's head darted around, as if he were standing in complete blackness and trying to find anything to orient himself with.

For a moment, Caelum's breath caught in his throat. *What the fuck is he seeing?*

The Marine's hands trembled, twitching toward the weapon he was no longer wielding as if he expected something to leap from the darkness only he could perceive.

Caelum exchanged a quick, concerned glance with Fariz before stepping closer to the Marine.

“Our light's are still on, Marine,” he said quietly, trying to ground the man back to reality. His voice was calm but firm, though the unease in his chest was growing. “Carefully look around. We've got eyes on everything.”

The Marine's breath came in shallow gasps as he glanced down at his own hands, towards the glow of his own armour's light strips—but the confusion didn't leave his posture.

"Then... why is it so dark?" he muttered again, barely audible, his voice laced with a deep, unsettling fear.

Caelum's gut twisted.

'This isn't normal.'

He made an executive decision. Whatever was happening to this Marine needed to be addressed—*now*.

He gestured to Fariz, signalling for him to keep a close eye on them, before turning his full attention back to the man in front of him.

"I'm going to run a quick check on you, Marine," Caelum said gently, keeping his voice low and reassuring. "We need to figure out what's going on. Just sit down here for me."

The Marine hesitated but, with Caelum's help, he slowly lowered himself to the ground, still visibly shaken. Caelum knelt beside him, reaching for his medical scanner, but as he activated it, nothing happened. He frowned, toggling the power again, only to realise that the scanner had completely shut down at some point since he had treated Nora.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath.

Cursing silently, Caelum moved to Plan B.

He would have to conduct a physical checkup by hand.

"Alright, stay still for me," he said, gently prodding the Marine's arms and torso, checking for any signs of trauma or injury that could explain the erratic behaviour.

Nothing seemed physically wrong at first glance, but the Marine's breathing remained laboured, and his head continued to dart back and forth, as if trying to find anything to latch onto visually.

"I'm going to remove your helmet," Caelum informed him calmly. "I need to check if there's any malfunction with your equipment or if you might've hit your head. It could explain the disorientation, maybe even temporary blindness."

The Marine didn't protest, his shaky breaths the only sound as Caelum carefully unlocked the seals of his helmet. He lifted it off slowly, expecting to see signs of a concussion or some visible injury.

But when the helmet came free, Caelum froze dead in his tracks.

Where the Marine's eyes should have been, there were only two gaping, empty sockets.

Caelum's heart lurched into his throat, his body locking in place as raw fear flooded through him. The Marine's face was eerily calm, unknowing, but the sight of those dark, hollow cavities staring back at him sent a wave of cold terror through Caelum's veins.

He fought the urge to recoil, barely managing to suppress the gasp that tried to escape his throat.

The Marine blinked—or *tried to*—and spoke again, his voice soft and distant. “Why... can't I see anything, doc?”

Caelum's pulse thundered in his ears, his breath caught somewhere between disbelief and horror. He stared at the Marine's empty eye sockets, the gaping black voids where his eyes should have been.

'How...?'

His mind tried to make sense of it, but there was no logic, no explanation that could account for this nightmare unfolding before him. The Marine sat there, oblivious to the terror he was causing, his hollow gaze directed aimlessly ahead.

“Why can't I see?” he asked again, his voice distant, detached, as though he hadn't noticed that his eyes were *gone*.

Caelum swallowed hard, fighting to keep his voice steady. “Stay calm, Marine. You're going to be alright.” The words felt hollow in his mouth, a lie he wasn't sure even he believed.

His hands were clammy, trembling slightly as he forced himself to place the Marine's helmet back over the empty sockets. He couldn't let the others see this—*not yet*.

He glanced up at Fariz, whose expression shifted from concern to grim suspicion as he saw Caelum's reaction. Caelum's hand signals were tight, urgent: *Keep eyes on the gate. Stay alert. No distractions.*

Fariz nodded, but the tension in his movements betrayed his real thoughts.

Caelum could feel the oppressive atmosphere pressing in from every angle, thickening like the air itself was charged with something dark and simply *wrong*. Whatever had happened to the Marine wasn't likely to stay an isolated incident. He could sense it creeping closer, something insidious lurking just beyond their sight, waiting for its moment.

Caelum's mind whirred as he tried to figure out what to do next.

His medical scanner was useless, and there was no explanation for how the Marine could've possibly just... *lost* his eyes without a single sign of trauma.

Whatever this was, it wasn't natural, and it wasn't following any rules he understood.

He needed answers, but there were none.

The other Marines were still holding their positions, flashlights trained on the gate, but there was a subtle shift in the air—an unease, a flicker of doubt passing through the rest of the Marines as they sensed that something was *very wrong*.

Caelum rose slowly, every instinct in his body *screaming* at him to be on guard.

The Marine beside him was muttering now, his voice barely a whisper, repeating the same words over and over: “It’s so dark... I can’t see... *It’s so dark...*”

Caelum administered a quick relaxant to the eyeless Marine, hoping to calm his rattled nerves. He gently secured the Marine’s helmet back on, hiding the ghastly sight.

The others couldn’t see this. Not yet.

Turning toward Fariz, he gestured with sharp, deliberate movements: *No Eyes. No Injury. Stay close.*

The gestures felt heavy, weighted with the gravity of the situation. Fariz froze for a heartbeat, his posture expressing disbelief, but he quickly caught himself and nodded, moving a step closer to the Marine, the tension in his body visible in the illumination of his flashlight.

As Caelum prepared to regroup, he caught another beam of light moving erratically across the room—one of Cups Squad’s flashlights darting wildly in jagged, unpredictable arcs. The beam slashed across the walls, the floor, and the ceiling, as though the Marine wielding it was searching for something that was never there.

Caelum’s heart sank. *‘Not again...!’*

He quickly approached the erratic Marine, signalling Fariz to stay with the one he had just treated. His mag-locked boots clanked and echoed faintly in the eerie stillness of the room as he moved, but every sound felt distant, like it was being swallowed by the oppressive atmosphere.

The Marine, his hands trembling slightly, didn’t even notice Caelum at first.

His flashlight jerked from side to side, desperately scanning the corners of the room. When Caelum got close enough, the Marine startled, raising his weapon towards him, but quickly caught himself.

“Ahh... Sergeant! I... I keep hearing it,” the Marine stammered, barely focusing on Caelum’s presence. His voice was a shaky whisper, like he was trying to hold himself together but failing miserably. “It’s this... this scraping sound. Like something sharp... dragging across metal. I can’t find it—*but I can hear it.*”

His head flicked toward Caelum, the movement suffused with desperation. “You don’t hear it? It’s... *right here!*”

Caelum frowned, his flashlight scanning the room along with the Marine’s, but there was nothing. No sound. Just the heavy, suffocating silence.

His mind raced as he tried to make sense of it.

Two Marines, both from Cups Squad, hearing things, seeing things—or *not* seeing, in the other case. Was it some kind of contamination? A hallucinogen? But there had been no sign of toxins, no visible injury, nothing that could explain this madness at all.

“I don’t hear anything,” Caelum said calmly, trying to keep the Marine grounded. “Stay focused. Whatever it is, it’s not in here. We’ve had eyes on the gate since the very beginning; nothing came through.”

The Marine shook his head frantically, his grip tightening on his rifle. “No, no, no...! It’s here. It’s right *here*! It’s been getting louder, closer, and it just... Won’t... *Stop!*”

His flashlight beam danced around the room, erratic, searching for something invisible, something only he could sense.

Caelum felt a chill crawl up his spine.

He gestured quickly for the Marine to hold still, crouching beside him and reaching for his medkit. He needed to keep the man calm, grounded.

‘If he panics as well, things will spiral out of control even faster.’

Caelum pulled out another relaxant, injecting it into the Marine’s neck to steady his nerves. As he did, he leaned in closer.

“There’s nothing there,” he repeated softly, trying to anchor the Marine’s focus. “We’ll figure this out, but you need to stay calm. Do you understand?”

The Marine nodded shakily, though his flashlight still twitched nervously in his hand. “But... What if it’s coming for us...?”

Caelum didn’t have an answer for that, and the dread settling in his gut only grew heavier.

He glanced back at Fariz, who was keeping a wary eye on the Marine with no eyes, as if waiting for the next shoe to drop. The oppressive silence hung between them all, thick with tension, broken only by the soft, trembling breaths of the Marines around him.

Something was deeply wrong in this room, something far beyond the scope of anything they had ever trained for.

Caelum’s pulse raced as his flashlight swept the room, the cone of light illuminating every corner, every shadow, as he searched for a threat he couldn’t see. His breath came in slow, measured exhales, a thin veil of control over the rising panic.

Whatever had breached the ship was already in here with them, lurking, unseen, and yet palpable in the thick tension pressing down on the squads.

As he scanned the room, his eyes caught movement—Kinuk’s flashlight, suddenly jerking and sweeping erratically across the space, just like the others before him. The beam danced wildly, casting sharp, chaotic patterns on the walls, and Caelum’s heart sank.

‘Not Kinuk too...!’

He broke into a swift stride, heading toward his squadmate in Orange Squad. But before he could even make it half-way towards Kinuk, a voice behind him stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Ahh... What the fuck...? Why did it get so dark?” The Marine’s voice was low, confused, and filled with that now-familiar dread.

Caelum froze, his blood turning cold as he realised what was happening.

Slowly, he turned, his stomach twisting.

The Marine behind him—the one he had just reassured—was standing there, his flashlight still pointed outward, but he wasn’t seeing the light.

Caelum took quick steps back toward him, his voice tight but controlled.

“I’m going to remove your helmet,” he said, already bracing for what he knew he would find. “Just stay calm, Marine.”

The Marine nodded, visibly unsettled but trusting Caelum.

He fumbled with the helmet locks for a moment, his fingers shaking slightly despite his best efforts, releasing the seal with a soft hiss. The helmet came off smoothly, and as Caelum lifted it away, his worst fears were confirmed.

The Marine’s face was pale, his expression blank with confusion, but his eyes—*his eyes were gone*.

Two empty, hollow sockets stared back at Caelum, the black voids where his eyes should have been. There was no blood, no trauma—just the same smooth, untouched skin around the missing eyes.

Caelum’s stomach lurched, a wave of nausea sweeping over him, but he forced it down.

He couldn’t show fear. Not now. Not with the others relying on him to figure this out.

The Marine blinked—or *tried to*, the absence of his eyes creating a grotesque, hollow movement beneath his eyelids.

“Why can’t I see, doc...?” he whispered, his voice shaking now, the terror beginning to seep in.

Caelum swallowed hard, placing a firm hand on the Marine’s shoulder.

"It's going to be alright," he lied, his voice calm despite the roiling panic in his chest. "It's just a temporary issue caused by the ship's abrupt jostle earlier; it will pass."

He tried to make the lacklustre pieces of the puzzle fit together somehow.

There was again no physical trauma—no blood, no sign of anything having happened to these Marines, and yet their eyes were missing. *Completely gone.*

Whatever was happening, it was spreading, creeping through the squad like a shadowy plague, and Caelum had no idea how to stop it. He glanced back toward Kinuk, whose flashlight continued to sweep erratically across the room.

The panic gnawed at Caelum—time was running out.

Whatever this thing was, it was picking them off one by one, and it would only be a matter of time before they were all consumed by it.

He clenched his fists, forcing down the rising fear.

'Enough of this.'

If they were already under attack, trying to hide in silence wouldn't save them.

Raising his voice above the thick, suffocating quiet, Caelum barked out orders. "Orange Squad, Cups Squad, move up! Form on me, now!"

The sudden command cut through the eerie atmosphere, his voice harsh and urgent. It echoed in the cavernous space, carrying weight far beyond the stillness that had gripped them.

"Iren, bring Kinuk over! Oka, help Nora get here!" he shouted, urgency flooding his voice. "Fariz, bring your man. We're grouping up!"

The Marines moved quickly, their flashlights slicing through the dark in sharp, jittery beams as they converged on Caelum's position.

He wasn't taking any chances now. He had to pull everyone together, and fast.

This was no longer about strategy, defending an area or subtlety—it was about pure survival.

"Form a perimeter!" Caelum ordered, his voice sharp as the group began to assemble. "I want every angle covered! 360 degrees! No blind spots!" He looked around, ensuring that every Marine had a sector to watch, their weapons trained on every shadow and corner of the room. "Keep the casualties in the centre. I'll figure out what's going on."

The squads fell into formation, tense but disciplined.

Iren and Oka guided Kinuk and Nora to the centre respectively, Kinuk's flashlight still trembling in wild arcs as he muttered about the scraping noises all around him.

Fariz did the same with the eyeless Marine. Everyone was on edge, and the feeling that something unseen was circling them—closing in—only made the dread more palpable.

Nobody dared speak up, despite the implicit removal of the silent protocol by Caelum's orders.

Caelum moved swiftly, deciding to check Kinuk first.

His hands moved to the helmet seals, and without hesitation, he removed it, half-expecting the same ghastly sight he had found in the others. But when he looked into Kinuk's eyes, a wave of relief washed over him—they were still there. Kinuk blinked, his pupils dilating under the flashlight's beam, and though they were bloodshot from stress, they were intact.

Caelum nodded to himself and leaned closer, examining Kinuk's ears next, hoping there might be some physical cause for the strange noises he was hearing.

But there was nothing—no sign of injury, no anomaly.

Everything looked normal, yet Kinuk's flashlight beam still jerked wildly, the Marine's breathing erratic as he strained to explain the scraping sounds that only he could hear.

"Scraping... Not metal, but... Wood? Bone...?"

Before Caelum could press him further, there was a sudden movement in his peripheral vision. Nora, positioned near Kinuk and the eyeless Marine in the centre, had raised her weapon, her rifle now aimed directly at Kinuk's head.

Caelum's heart lurched as he shot to his feet, reaching out instinctively to stop her.

"Nora! What are you—?!"

She froze, her body locked in place, her helmeted head jerking around as if she were trying to track something invisible. "Wait..." she breathed, her voice shaky. "I... I thought I saw something. Behind Kinuk, right next to you."

Caelum whipped around, his own flashlight sweeping the space next to him, but there was nothing—just the empty, cold air and the eerie, flickering shadows cast by their lights.

He scanned the area, muscles tense, but still nothing moved.

The room was silent again, save for the unsteady breathing of his Marines around him.

Nora lowered her rifle slowly, her shoulders sagging with visible relief.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, her voice small. "I could've sworn... I'm sorry, Caelum."

"It's alright," Caelum replied, though his nerves were thoroughly frayed by now.

He let out a slow breath, trying to steady himself as best he could.

His mind raced, trying to figure out what was happening.

'Hallucinations? Something in the air, maybe?' It made no sense, as they were all wearing fully sealed armours, but the questions continued to gnaw at him. *'Something Psychic, maybe...? But I don't feel any strain on my Resolve at all...'*

He crouched back down next to Kinuk, intending to finish his examination, when another sharp movement caught his attention. One of Cups Squad's Marines, standing at the outer perimeter, had abruptly aimed his rifle at Oka.

Caelum's heart jumped again.

"Hold your fire!" he shouted, darting up and moving toward the Marine, but before he could reach him, the Marine shook his head in confusion, lowering his weapon.

"I saw... I saw something," the Marine stammered, his flashlight beam trembling. "Behind him. Right there, I swear. I thought it was right there..."

'That can't be a coincidence.'

He swung his flashlight toward the spot behind Oka where the Marine had indicated, but just like with Nora—there was nothing.

No sign of movement, no shadow, no figure.

Oka, glancing back over his shoulder, shook his head, his voice uneasy. "I didn't see anything."

Something was clearly playing with them, slipping in and out of their perception, turning their own senses against them. Caelum's instincts screamed that whatever was causing this wasn't just an illusion—it was very real; and dangerous.

"Stay sharp!" Caelum ordered, his voice tight with urgency. "Don't fire unless you *know* you've got a target. Something's messing with our heads, but it's *here*."

Caelum's voice echoed in the dim room, the warning hanging heavy in the air. His flashlight trembled slightly in his grip as he scanned the area, the creeping dread curling around his thoughts like cold, suffocating tendrils.

His heart hammered in his chest as his eyes darted between the Marines, checking their positions. Everyone stood rigid, alert, weapons raised, flashlights sweeping the room.

But the shadows seemed to pulse, growing deeper, more menacing, as if they were alive, crawling closer with every passing second.

Then, finally, out of the corner of his eye—*movement*.

Without thinking, Caelum whipped his flashlight and weapon toward Fariz, finger hovering over the trigger. The beam of light cut through the dark, landing squarely on the squad leader—but there was nothing behind him.

No shadow, no figure. Just empty space.

Caelum's breath caught in his throat, his muscles tense as he fought the urge to fire. *'There was something there. I saw something. I know it.'*

He swallowed hard, lowering his weapon slightly, but the sense of something lurking just out of sight remained.

"I saw it too," he muttered, his voice tight, barely above a whisper. He straightened up, looking at the rest of the Marines. "Everyone, move back-to-back. Cover each other's blind spots. *Now.*"

They reacted quickly, shifting into pairs, backs pressed against one another as they reformed the perimeter. Caelum knew the change in formation would sacrifice their full visual coverage—there would be gaps in the light cones now—but it was a necessary trade-off.

Whatever was out there was clearly trying to get to them from behind.

They couldn't let it pick them off, not like this.

But even as the squad moved into their new positions, the oppressive weight of the unseen presence continued to press down on them. And then, just as Caelum thought the room had settled into a tense silence, Kinuk's voice broke through the quiet.

"Wait... Why we turn off lights?"

Caelum's blood ran cold.

His eyes snapped toward Kinuk, who sat on the ground, frantically waving his flashlight around. The beam was still active, still casting its light across the room, but Kinuk's head was darting in every direction—as *if he couldn't see it.*

Caelum's stomach dropped, dread pooling in his chest like ice.

'No. No, it can't be. Not like this.'

He stepped forward, his flashlight illuminating Kinuk's face. His heart seized in his chest as he saw the truth.

Kinuk's eyes were gone.

Just like the others, the only thing staring back at Caelum were two empty, hollow sockets.

There was no sign of blood, no trauma—just the same smooth, untouched skin where his eyes should have been. But Kinuk hadn't even *noticed*—he was still waving the flashlight, his expression twisting in confusion and terror, completely unaware that his sight had been stolen from him.

Caelum's breath caught in his throat as a wave of terror crashed over him.

For a brief, paralyzing moment, his body locked in place, the full horror of the situation beginning to suffocate him. Whatever this thing was, it was moving through them—stealing their sight, creeping into their minds—and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Worse, they couldn't even *perceive* it.

Just as the dread seemed unbearable, a sound cut through the oppressive silence—a sharp, grating noise, like a blade scraping over brittle rock.

Caelum's heart lurched, a cold spike of panic driving through him.

Was it his turn? He clenched his rifle tighter, ready for the worst, his mind racing.

But then he noticed something else—the other Marines around him had all turned their heads in the same direction. They were reacting, too. Every flashlight in the squad shifted toward the same source.

They had heard it. *All* of them.

This wasn't another trick of the mind. The sound was *real* this time.

The scraping grew louder, jagged, as if whatever was making the noise was dragging itself closer. The Marines' flashlights cut through the darkness, scanning the room for the origin of the sound.

Then, a sharp intake of breath broke the silence—*Nora*.

Caelum whipped his head back toward her.

She stood frozen, her breath caught in her throat, her wide, horrified eyes fixated on something just beyond the edge of the light. Her Perception had always been sharper than the rest of theirs, and now, she saw something they hadn't quite yet.

A heartbeat later, the first cone of light illuminated what she had seen—a pair of disembodied eyes, floating in the darkness. Their wet, glossy surface glistened under the harsh beams of the Marines' flashlights. Another pair appeared beside them, unblinking, staring back at them with an eerie, unnatural stillness.

The sight was so shocking, so bizarre, that for a moment, no one moved.

Caelum felt his heart pounding in his chest, but his mind couldn't process the strange, horrible thing they were witnessing. At some point he realised that the scraping sound had stopped, but he couldn't even remember *when*—had it been before or after they found the eyes?

And then, in the same breath, the silence *shattered*.

A sickening crunch echoed from behind him, the unmistakable sound of bones breaking and flesh tearing. Caelum whipped around, the flashlight beam sweeping back toward the centre of the formation—where Kinuk, Nora, and the two eyeless Marines were.

The scene before him was a nightmare.

Nora had already opened fire, her rifle spitting rounds into the air as her face twisted in shock and panic. But there was nothing there—no enemy, no target—just the horrific aftermath.

The two eyeless Marines from Cups Squad were unrecognisable.

Their bodies had been torn apart in an instant, reduced to bloody piles of flesh and bone. Ripped into pieces so small, it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Blood and viscera had splattered across the ground, covering both Kinuk and Nora in a grotesque spray of innards, skin, and gore.

The sight was overwhelming, the metallic tang of blood thick in the air. Caelum's instincts were screaming, but no matter how hard he looked, he couldn't see what had done this.

"What the fuck—" Fariz started, but his words were lost in the roar of Nora's gunfire.

Her weapon barked into the dark, muzzle flashes cutting through the gloom, but she wasn't aiming at anything—just shooting blindly, her breath coming in panicked, ragged gasps.

The soft, slithering scrape echoed again, slipping in and out of their hearing like a predator playing with its prey. It was always just beyond their reach, in the periphery, keeping them on edge. Every Marine stood rigid, rifles twitching as they scanned the room, the beams of their flashlights jerking in uncoordinated directions.

No one knew where to look.

Movement flashed in the corner of Caelum's eye.

His muscles tightened, his finger hovering over the trigger as he swung his rifle toward Oka.

But it was gone before he could lock onto it. Another flicker—a shadow darting behind Iren.

He spun, almost pulling the trigger again. His nerves were frayed, his mind racing.

What was it? Where was it? What was the plan?

The scraping sound vanished again, leaving them in silence.

Then, without warning, one of Cups Squad's Marines spoke up.

"Why'd we turn off the light?"

The words sent a cold shiver through Caelum's spine.

'No...!'

It was the same question, the same *exact* words he had heard three times before. His stomach churned, his grip tightening on his rifle.

He didn't need to look. He already knew.

The Marine had just lost his eyes, somehow, some way.

It was happening again.

Panic was spreading like wildfire. Every Marine was seeing movement now—just out of reach, always *just* at the edge of their vision.

Caelum whipped his flashlight toward the Marine who had just spoken, but saw nothing.

His thoughts raced, searching frantically for a solution, some way to stop this, to fight back.

But there was nothing. He had no idea what to do.

This was neither something they had ever trained for, nor something that made any logical sense. There wasn't even a hint of psychic energy drawing at his Resolve either, removing the last "reasonable" explanation from his arsenal.

Desperation clawed at his thoughts, a frantic need to protect his squad, to keep them all alive. But how could he protect them from something they couldn't find, couldn't even see?

And then, the inevitable happened.

Oka had seen something.

His head snapped to the side, his rifle following the movement as he aimed at Fariz. His breath hitched as he steadied the weapon, but before he could fire, Iren, standing just next to him, saw the same thing—or something else.

She shifted, bumping into Oka's shoulder.

It was a small movement, but enough to jar Oka's finger on the trigger.

The gun went off, aimed directly at Fariz's head.

Caelum's heart seized as he watched the round sail through the air, straight for Fariz's head.

It missed him by a hair's breadth, which relieved Caelum for an instant, but that feeling was immediately replaced by his blood running cold at the realisation that something crucial was missing from this near-miss.

The bullet hadn't just missed Fariz; it didn't hit *anything*.

Not the walls. Not the ceiling. Not the floor.

The bullet—just like the threat that was hunting them—was simply *gone*.

Caelum's mind raced, trying to piece together what was happening.

But before he could catch his breath, the sound returned—*the scraping*.

Only this time, it was faster. Louder.

It was as though whatever was hunting them had been kicked into a frenzy.

The noise circled them, erratic and unnerving, like claws raking across metal at impossible speeds. It was everywhere and nowhere, building in intensity, hammering against their already frayed nerves.

Caelum's body tensed as he tried to track the source, but the sound was maddening—constantly shifting, disorienting.

Then, Fariz's voice cut through the chaos.

"Why are we turning off the lights?"

Caelum's blood ran cold. '*Not again.*'

He turned his head slowly, already knowing what he'd see.

Fariz stood there, his head moving erratically, his rifle slackening in his hands.

His eyes—*gone*.

Empty sockets stared back at Caelum, hollow and lifeless, though Fariz had yet to realise it.

Before Caelum could respond, Iren's voice followed to his left, her tone low and confused. "Why are the lights off...?"

A wave of dread crashed over Caelum as he turned toward her.

Her eyes, too, had vanished—replaced by those same black, gaping voids.

It was happening faster. *Too fast.*

In a heartbeat, it was down to four of them. Nora, Oka, the last remaining member of Cups Squad, and Caelum himself—the only ones left with their eyesight intact.

They stood huddled together, their flashlights twitching across the room, trying to cover every angle, but it wasn't enough. The movement was everywhere now, flickers of shadows darting just out of reach, shapes shifting just beyond their view.

"Cover all angles!" Caelum barked, his voice tight with desperation.

They were running out of time.

Whatever was out there, whatever was stalking them, was finishing them faster and faster.

Nora, positioned just to his right now, suddenly gasped.

"Eyes... floating... two pairs..."

Her voice trembled as her flashlight beam found them—two disembodied eyes, just like before, hovering in the dark, their wet surfaces glistening in the light.

But this time, Caelum wasn't about to let the same thing happen again.

In an instant, he made a decision.

He wouldn't turn away from the eyeless Marines this time around; as much as he wanted to figure out what was going on with the disembodied floating eyes.

If they were going to die, if this thing was going to pick them off, he would be ready. His rifle was aimed squarely at the eyeless Marines behind them, his gaze locked on them.

If it struck, he would shoot. He'd kill whatever it was.

But... nothing happened.

The moments stretched out, each one agonisingly long.

The eyes remained inside Nora's cone of light, unblinking, while the eyeless Marines stood eerily still. The tension mounted, suffocating, but there was no attack.

No sudden movement at all.

Caelum's grip on his rifle tightened as his mind spiralled.

Was it waiting? Was it toying with them?

His focus wavered slightly, his flashlight beam flicking toward the edges of the room, sweeping the shadows. And that's when he saw it—*something thoroughly strange*, lying just behind Fariz on the ground. It was barely there, like a shimmer at the very edge of his vision, but before he could fully process it, before he could bring his light to bear, it was gone.

Caelum's breath hitched. The realisation struck him like a bolt of lightning.

"What if..." he whispered to himself, an idea forming in his mind. "What if it can only be perceived at the very edges of our perception...?"

It made sense—every time they turned to look directly at the movement, whatever had caused them vanished like it had never existed in the first place.

Every time they tried to bring it into full focus, it disappeared.

But in the corner of their vision, at the fringes of what they could see, it was real.

'That's why it was always out of reach...!'

He forced himself to look back toward the eyeless Marines, letting only the edges of his vision focus on the area behind Fariz.

It was difficult—every instinct screamed at him to look directly, to get a clearer view—but he resisted.

And... There *it* was.

Something was lying motionless on the ground behind Fariz, a dark, shapeless form just barely visible in his peripheral vision.

Caelum's pulse quickened.

He couldn't make out what it was—every time his curiosity pulled at him, urging him to move his eyes just a millimetre closer to focus, the shape flickered and disappeared entirely. It was like trying to hold onto smoke, something intangible that evaded him the moment he looked too closely.

"Nora, Oka!" Caelum called out, his voice sharp but quiet, trying to keep the rising panic from spilling over. "Keep an eye on the edges of your vision. Don't look directly at it... I think that's how it hides!"

The two Marines shifted slightly, not doubting their squad leader's words for even a second, their heads turning just enough to keep their peripheral vision on the shadows around them.

Caelum's brain was overclocked now, trying to figure out the situation and create a plan that could get them out of this situation.

This was the key—it simply *had* to be.

Every time they tried to focus, to understand, the thing vanished.

But in the corners of their sight, it lingered—*watching, waiting*.

The creature seemed to prey on their inability to look directly at it, and now the purpose of taking their eyes made chilling sense.

'Less eyes, less peripheral vision. More places for it to hide.'

He turned to Oka, his voice carrying a sharp edge of desperation. "Oka, I think you hit one earlier. Your Emperor-damned luck might've saved us—you caught it when you missed Fariz. You didn't see it, but you hit it when the shot went wide."

Oka gave a shaky nod, his knuckles white around his rifle. "I didn't even realise," he muttered, his voice strained with a mixture of fear and disbelief.

"Just saw something move, and..." He trailed off, his eyes darting nervously into the shadows that seemed to pulse at the edges of their light.

"What's the plan, sarge?" Oka asked after a moment, his voice regaining some of its usual grit now that they had a faint understanding of what they were up against.

Caelum's mind churned, trying to formulate a plan with what little information they had.

"One of us has to always keep an eye on the casualties," he said, his voice steady despite the mounting tension. "This thing—it's primed to kill them. Last time we saw those floating eyes, it took out the first two members of Cups Squad. If we want to stop that from

happening again, we need to make sure someone's always watching them. I don't think it can strike if we're looking."

He turned his attention to the last remaining Marine from Cups Squad, who was standing at Iren's back, his face pale and eyes wide with terror behind his visor.

"What's your name, Marine?" Caelum asked, his tone softer now, trying to steady the rattled Marine.

"A... Arcadius, sir," the Marine stammered, his voice trembling with the same fear that gripped them all. He looked like he was barely holding himself together.

Caelum nodded, keeping his voice calm and firm. "Arcadius, I need you to keep an eye on them—the casualties. Don't let your eyes leave them. Can you do that for me?"

There was a tense pause as Arcadius swallowed hard, his fear nearly tangible in the air.

But then, as if having a clear task gave him something to hold onto, the Marine straightened his back. "Yes, sir. I can do that," he replied, his voice steadier now.

Giving Arcadius something specific to focus on had helped, even if only for the moment. It was all about keeping everyone's mind sharp, keeping them on task—because any slip-up now could cost them everything.

Before Caelum could take a breath, the atmosphere around them shifted, like the air itself grew heavier. Then, without warning, it happened.

A sickening crunch, followed by the unmistakable sound of flesh tearing.

Caelum's heart seized in his chest as his flashlight whipped toward the centre of the formation—where Iren and Fariz stood moments ago. The sight that greeted him turned his blood cold.

Iren and Fariz were gone, their bodies torn apart in the same brutal fashion as the others, reduced to mangled piles of flesh and bone in a mere instant.

Blood sprayed across the floor, soaking Kinuk in a fresh layer of crimson. It was as if the attack had come from nowhere, as swift as it was horrifying.

"*Fuck!*" Caelum hissed, his voice breaking with frustration and shock.

His mind reeled—*how could this have happened again?*

He turned on Arcadius, who stood frozen, his face pale as a ghost.

"I... I didn't look away, I swear!" Arcadius stammered, his voice laced with terror. "I was watching them the whole time. I didn't blink—I swear I didn't blink!"

Caelum's jaw tightened, his fists clenched around his rifle.

He didn't know whether to believe Arcadius or not. The Marine's fear was palpable, his eyes wide and frantic, but was it possible that he had lost focus? A single blink, a brief distraction—that's all it would have taken.

And now, Iren—*Iren*—was dead.

The weight of her loss hit him harder than he expected.

Iren had been more than just a soldier under his command—she had been a constant, a steady presence on the battlefield. The realisation that she was gone now, that she had been reduced to nothing in the span of a heartbeat, made his stomach turn.

But he couldn't let it show. Not now.

He swallowed hard, forcing the grief down, pushing it to the back of his mind. '*Later.*'

She'd be back with them all if they somehow survived this; all they had to do was keep the Void Daemons from eating her Soul and she'd be going straight to the respawn pods aboard the ship.

As long as they just held on...

"Oka," Caelum said, his voice strained but sharp. "I need you to help Arcadius keep an eye on Kinuk. Two sets of eyes. Maybe Arcadius blinked, maybe he lost focus—*I don't know*—but we're not taking any chances. Keep your attention on Kinuk, both of you. Don't look away. Don't even *blink*. Not for a second."

Oka nodded grimly, him and Nora moving into position beside Arcadius.

He was silent, but his face was tight with fear, his knuckles white around the grip of his rifle.

Arcadius nodded as well, his eyes still darting between the gruesome remains of Iren and Fariz, but he seemed to steady himself with the new task.

With two sets of eyes on Kinuk, Caelum hoped—*prayed*—that his squad member would be safe. The thought of losing Kinuk, of watching another one of his team be ripped apart, was unbearable. But he had no choice but to keep going, to push through the mounting dread that threatened to crush him.

He forced himself to sweep his flashlight across the room again, keeping his gaze trained on the corners of his vision. There had to be *something*, some sign of movement that would reveal the creature's presence.

But all he saw were flickers of shadows, dancing at the edges of the light.

The unseen creature was playing with them, toying with their senses, driving them to the brink. The scraping sounds had grown more erratic, shifting unpredictably around the room, growing louder and then fading again, as if it was right next to them and then suddenly far away.

Caelum gritted his teeth, every muscle in his body tense as he scanned the perimeter, his heart thudding like a war drum in his chest. And then he saw it—*another pair of eyes*.

But this time, something in their dull, familiar wet gleam made his stomach twist.

These weren't just random eyes. He knew those eyes for he had seen them many, many times before—for years.

They were Kinuk's.

The horrifying realisation hit him like a punch to the gut.

All of the disembodied eyes they had seen earlier—the eyes floating toward them, taunting them—had belonged to the Marines who had been taken.

Fariz. Iren.

And now, Kinuk's eyes were staring straight at him, soulless and empty, as they drifted toward him through the dimness.

"Emperor-dammit..." Caelum whispered, his voice barely audible.

A sudden flicker of light snapped him back into the moment.

Oka's flashlight was sputtering, the beam flickering on and off, casting wild shadows across the walls. Oka swore under his breath, cursing as he smacked the flashlight in frustration, trying to get it back up and running.

"Shit! Shit!" Oka's voice was tight, panicked, as the light failed completely for a second before flickering back to life.

In that brief moment of darkness, Caelum's heart sank. Oka had taken his eyes off Kinuk.

When Oka looked back up, his face twisted with horror as he realised his mistake.

Much to Caelum's relief, however, he saw that nothing had happened to Kinuk; Arcadius had kept his eyes on him. But then, from behind Oka, Caelum heard the dreaded words that made his heart sink.

"Why are we turning off the lights...?"

Nora's voice. *'No, not Nora. Not now!'*

He swung his flashlight and rifle toward her direction, his eyes barely catching a flicker of movement at the edge of his vision.

There it was.

The creature—just a shadow, a blur—slipping through the darkness, fast and unseen. He fired, his rifle barking out rounds, but aiming with only his peripheral vision was like shooting at ghosts.

His bullets barely missed, and the creature vanished into the blackness, escaping unharmed.

Caelum cursed under his breath, the frustration and helplessness building like a knot in his chest. Shooting at something he couldn't see—it was impossible. He glanced toward Nora, whose eyes had been claimed now, her voice trailing off into an eerie silence.

Another one lost.

He had been hoping to be able to rely on Nora's high Perception to find the creature, but now she was reduced to nothing but a liability; like Kinuk and all the other eyeless before her.

He had to act fast.

"Nora, move next to Kinuk!" Caelum ordered, his voice sharp and tense. "Oka, Arcadius—keep your eyes on them, both of you!"

Oka's face was pale, guilt etched into his expression as he nodded and repositioned himself.

He knew his mistake had cost them Nora's eyes, and now Kinuk was still at risk.

"Get over here, Oka," Caelum snapped, trying to regain control of the spiralling situation. "You're with me and Arcadius. We need to keep our backs to each other, keep this thing from catching us by surprise again."

Oka moved quickly, his flashlight still flickering but holding steady for now.

The three of them formed a tight, defensive group.

Oka and Arcadius kept their eyes fixed on Kinuk and Nora, while Caelum swept the edges of the room with his own flashlight, desperately searching for any sign of the creature, the Daemon that had been stalking them.

With every person they lost, they had lost more and more light.

And with less light, the room seemed to grow darker, heavier, as though the shadows themselves were closing in, suffocating them. The weight of it pressed on Caelum's mind, gnawing at his concentration.

He could feel it—the inevitability of their situation. It was only a matter of time.

A matter of time until they grew sloppy.

Until fatigue set in and one of them missed a crucial moment. A matter of time until someone blinked at the wrong instant and the creature struck again.

But also, a matter of time until the reinforcements arrived.

If they held out long enough, there would be more eyes—more light—enough to cover every inch of the room, every shadow, every hiding place this thing could use.

Caelum had no idea how long it had been since he had last heard the Monarch speak.

Minutes? Hours? It felt like an eternity had passed, each second stretching out endlessly.

The oppressive silence had filled the void, aside from the occasional attempts by the monster to make them look towards its scraping sounds, making time itself feel warped, like they were trapped in a nightmare with no end in sight.

But despite the growing darkness and the crushing sense of dread that urged him to try and come up with extra solutions; with plans to work on and ways to get out of this, Caelum knew they had only one option: Last as long as possible. Keep watching, keep their focus and hold on until the reinforcements arrived.

It was a fragile hope, but it was all they had left.

Caelum, Oka, and Arcadius stood tense, the weight of the unseen Daemon pressing down on them like an invisible hand. Every second felt like a lifetime, each flicker of the flashlights threatening to plunge them into the unknown.

They were standing on the edge, staring into the abyss.

And that's when it happened.

A flicker of movement at the edge of Oka's vision—two sets of disembodied eyes.

Nora's and Kinuk's. Pairs he had known for years, too familiar to ignore.

They floated toward him, hovering eerily in the dim light, and despite *knowing* it was the Void Daemon's trick, Oka couldn't help but stare. His breath hitched, and for a brief moment, his flashlight dipped.

It was all the Daemon needed.

In an instant, the creature struck.

Caelum only heard the dreaded words behind him "Why are we turning off the lights...?"

"*Arcadius!*" Caelum shouted, but it was too late. The Marine was already gone, his sight claimed.

It was just Caelum and Oka now.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck... I'm so sorry. Fuck," Oka repeated, again and again.

Caelum's grip tightened on his rifle, his body rigid with terror, but his instincts kicked in as he saw a faint blur—just at the edge of his vision.

He fired, the shot cracking through the darkness.

The Daemon stumbled, briefly visible as it recoiled from the impact. But it vanished just as quickly, disappearing back into the shadows, wounded but far from dead.

The room descended into an unbearable tension, the air thick with dread.

Caelum could hear Oka's shallow breathing and cursing beside him, the flicker of his flashlight like a heartbeat—unstable, fragile.

Then, with a sputter and a final flicker, Oka's flashlight finally died.

"No, no, no!" Oka cursed, smacking the dead flashlight in a vain attempt to bring it back to life. But in that brief moment of darkness, it was over.

"Why are we turning off the lights...?" Oka's voice, trembling and weak, signalled the end.

Caelum spun, his flashlight finding Oka too late. His eyes were gone, just like the others.

The Daemon had claimed him.

Caelum was alone now, the last one standing, surrounded by the eyeless remains of his fellow Marines and Squadmates, their empty sockets reflecting his flashlight like a cruel mockery.

Caelum's pulse raced, sweat pouring down his face as he frantically swept his light over the others.

He couldn't do this alone.

His heart pounded in his chest, his breaths coming in ragged gasps. His hands trembled, barely able to keep the flashlight steady as he tried to keep the light on all five of them—Kinuk, Nora, Arcadius, Oka, and himself.

But deep down, he knew.

'This is where I die...'

It wasn't just death he feared. It was what came after. The Daemon would claim his Soul, devour it, making resurrection impossible. There would be no coming back.

This was it—*true*, eternal death.

But Caelum wasn't going down without a fight.

With a last, defiant thought, he made a decision.

If he was going to die here, he would at least try to take the Daemon with him.

He dropped his rifle and reached for the grenades strapped to his belt without taking his eyes off of the others, pulling them free with trembling hands. His fingers worked with practised efficiency, setting the detonations in parallel.

He felt for Kinuk's grenades as well, adding them to the mix. His eyes watered, burning with exhaustion, but he forced himself to keep them open.

'Just a little longer...! If I can somehow kill this thing, maybe the Souls of the others—maybe even mine—will be safe.'

The scraping sound returned, circling him, closing in for the final blow.

Caelum gritted his teeth, his grip tightening around the grenades.

'Come on, you bastard.'

The darkness pressed closer, the Daemon's presence suffocating, and Caelum knew the moment was near. With his last shred of strength, he pressed the biometric buttons on the grenades, his vision blurring as he prepared to let go.

"If I'm going down, I'm taking you with me," Caelum growled through gritted teeth, his voice a mix of fury and despair. His left eye closed as his bodily functions finally overrode his effort of will to keep both eyes open.

Immediately, the scraping sound stopped.

The silence was absolute, thick and oppressive.

For a moment, Caelum's heart skipped a beat, hope flickering in his chest.

But that flicker was short-lived.

Through his watery, blurred vision, his right eye caught movement—*something* coming out of the darkness towards him. The outline of a figure, just barely visible, stepping toward him with deliberate menace.

It was the Void Daemon, fully revealed, a monstrous blur that seemed to shift and ripple with the shadows. And then the realisation hit him with a cold, gut-wrenching horror—he had overlooked something crucial this entire time.

The Daemon always took *both* eyes at once; used *both* eyes to distract its victims.

The creature wasn't bound by just *sight* alone.

It required more than just a single eye to keep it caged.

He had thought he could fight it, thought that he could trap it within the light—but the Daemon had been playing with him all along.

Before the thought fully formed in his mind, a searing pain exploded through his body.

Caelum's scream tore from his throat, primal and raw, as both of his arms were ripped clean from his shoulders. The world became a blur of agony and terror as he watched his own limbs—along with the flashlight and the grenades—tumble away into the darkness.

The grenades exploded, but the blast was far off—*too* far away.

The light, the shrapnel, the flames—all useless now, dissipating in the distant black, leaving Caelum and his squad behind, untouched by salvation.

As the light faded, plunging the room into complete and utter darkness, Caelum's body shook with a horrible numbness.

He could hear it—the sound of breaking bones, of flesh being torn apart from behind him.

Arcadius, Kinuk, Nora, and Oka—he knew without seeing, without turning—were being eviscerated. The sound was unmistakable.

Their lives snuffed out in an instant, ripped to pieces like fragile paper.

He was the last.

Caelum's breath came in shallow, ragged gasps as the pain became a dull throb, the numbness spreading through his body.

The Daemon hadn't claimed him yet, not fully.

He had just a few more moments—moments to reflect, to realise that this was truly the end.

There would be no coming back. No resurrection.

The Daemon would claim his soul, devouring him whole, erasing him from existence.

His body, his mind, his essence—all would be lost to the Void.

With the last flicker of his consciousness, Caelum closed his remaining eye, surrendering to the inevitable.

'Voldamiz, Iren, Oka, Kinuk, Nora... I'm sorry... I tried... I'm so, so, sorry...'

And then, in the final seconds of his awareness, Caelum felt his body being torn apart, ripped limb from limb, the Daemon killing him surprisingly slowly, compared to the rest.

The last threads of his consciousness unravelled into the abyss as life faded from the torn pieces of body...

