

Chapter 1

The inside of the bar was dimly lit—classy, not seedy—but charged with an electric tension that clung to the air. Then again, that tension followed Kael wherever he went these days. Nothing was safe. Nowhere was sacred. Not for men like him, not anymore.

He sat at the far end, where the glow didn't quite reach, where the shadows softened his face into something unremarkable.

His head was down, eyes fixed on the slow shimmer of his drink. He wasn't here to socialize. He was here to keep himself alive. One more year, maybe ten. In a place like this, the odds certainly weren't on his side.

He glanced toward the window. Rain poured in thick sheets, running down the glass like strands of mercury. The skyline still bled through, cold and gleaming, always watching.

The Capital. The crown jewel of the Unified Order—a city built on ambition, fortune, and faith. To most, it was the pinnacle of civilization. But to Kael, it was a cage dressed in glass and circuitry, humming with artificial peace. Even here, in the Fashion District where artistic expression still thrived, the city's clean, utilitarian design pressed in from all sides. No amount of color could breathe life into the soulless machinery of the Order.

He hadn't set foot here in over a decade. And he wouldn't have returned unless he had no other choice.

Around him, people moved in flickers of color and tech. Fitted jackets rippled with programmable filaments, their patterns shifting in sync with the pulse of the room. Hair streaked with bioluminescent dye glowed like static fire, and faces were lit from within by the soft hum of subdermal implants. The crowd was loud, curated, and synthetic.

Kael was none of those things.

His jacket was a relic, scavenged and repurposed. The fabric was sun-bleached and rain-stained from too many years spent on the move. Under the bar's dim lights, the frayed edges of his sleeves caught just enough gleam to betray their age. No smart fibers. No mood-linked mesh. That was intentional. Capital fashion glowed and reacted to biometric stress. He preferred fabric that wouldn't betray him.

From his corner seat at the far end of the bar counter, Kael faced the front entrance. Always face the door.

He had already scanned for exits, it was virtually instinct at this point. The main door was never a good option. The windows along the back wall might work in a pinch, but there was no telling what was on the other side—ten feet of alley, or a straight drop into black. A rear access through

the kitchen was visible from the other side of the bar. If it came to it, it was doable. He weighed the speed it would take to vault the bar counter if things got ugly.

They always got ugly.

His fingers curled around the glass as he slowly swirled the last of his drink. The glowing liquid fizzed softly, releasing thin tendrils of vapor that shimmered like heatwaves. Nearly gone.

It was almost time.

The drink was a marker—the first signal. The second would be the White Horizon. Once he ordered that, the contact would move. He was to follow. No words. No mistakes.

Stealth? That was easy. Ordering the drink? That was the real challenge.

Fortunately, this upscale establishment didn't require biometric payment up front. No fingerprint scans. No retinal checks at the counter. That part came later, after the drinks, when it was time to settle up. But Kael had no plans to stick around for the bill.

Even here, surrounded by polished chrome and glistening tech, some things hadn't changed. Ordering a drink still followed the same old social ritual, where a quiet request was passed across the counter by catching the bartender's eye, giving a nod, or speaking just loud enough to be heard. For someone like him, that simple exchange could be harder than breaching a locked checkpoint.

He raised his hand to signal, but something above caught his eye. He lowered it just as quickly.

Above the counter, a translucent datascreen hovered, cycling through propaganda loops of armored patrols moving through spotless streets and sweeping shots of cities glistening beneath the sun. Typical Order propaganda. The same promises. The same lies.

"Two hundred years of order. Two centuries of peace. The Unified Order stands eternal."

The words scrolled in bold, flawless lettering, framed by the symbol of the Order—a glowing eye nested inside a perfect circle.

The voiceover was as sterile as the air filtration.

"In two days' time, we gather to celebrate an achievement unlike any other. A ceremony worthy of this moment in history."

Kael didn't look up, just let his gaze shift left then right—low and slow, ensuring his eyes never rose high enough to be noticed. No one was paying attention. The message droned on, swallowed by the clink of glass and low pulse of music. To them, it was background noise. This was the only world they had ever known.

But for Kael, it was just the latest chapter. He had been there when the Unified Order first rose during the Collapse, when they seized power in the name of stability. It was all a carefully constructed illusion, built to last just long enough for people to forget what had come before. And they had.

The others in this bar—they only had this small window of time, this sliver of existence to witness it. A mere handful of decades in a world that had existed long before them and would keep shifting long after they were gone.

But Kael? He had seen what came before. Everything had changed. The names, the creeds, the faces upon the throne. But he remained. No matter how many times they proclaimed the Order to be eternal—Kael knew the truth.

Nothing was eternal.

A low rumble passed beneath him, distant yet guttural. For a second, it was hard to tell whether it came from the thunder outside or the bass thrumming through the floor. Either way, the storm was building. And that was enough to pull him back.

Every moment he lingered was another chance for danger. It was time for the White Horizon.

He raised his hand again, higher this time. It was a clear signal.

Across the bar, there was a flicker of movement. The bartender was already threading through the crowd, his silhouette sharpening as he approached.

He came to a stop across from Kael. His voice was raspy but warm. “Another one so soon? What’d you think of that first pour? That’s my specialty. I make it for every—”

The doors swung open—not with a bang, but with weight. No sound, just pressure.

The air shifted before anyone understood why. Conversations thinned, laughter faltered. The room froze mid-motion. Fingers paused above screens and stems. Even the music seemed to hold its breath.

Kael’s head lifted. He caught the glow first—crimson against the smoke-hazed light—then the silhouettes filling the doorway.

Behind them, rain poured in unbroken sheets, hissing as it struck the torchlight. The downpour painted the street in streaks of molten red and shadow.

A gust of cold air rolled into the bar, curling around ankles and scattering the haze. Yet beneath it came the heat—subtle but alive—the warmth of open flame pushing back against the chill.

The Flamebearers didn't need to announce themselves. Their presence did the work. Crimson cloaks, nanoweave armor beneath. The leader, a towering man in gold-trimmed robes, carried a lit torch—ancient in design, yet modern in purpose. Symbolic. Tactical. Weaponized flame bound to ceremonial fuel.

The five figures descended the short metal steps into the bar's heart, boots striking in measured rhythm. Each step echoed through the silence, a steady drumbeat that left no question who commanded the room.

The crowd reacted as one. Some scattered on instinct, diving behind booths and counters. Others remained frozen, caught between shock and morbid curiosity. Even in the Capital, fear was muscle memory when zealots arrived.

Kael stayed still, breathing through the sudden intrusion. The night had shifted—there was no denying that. But that was nothing new. Change never rattled him. Plans broke. People broke. You adapted or you died. It was moments such as these that made his pistol weigh a hundred pounds. He could feel the weight of it on his hip, even concealed under layers of clothing. The weight of options.

The Flamebearers pressed deeper into the room, each step deliberate. A low chant thrummed beneath the sound of their steps. Like a funeral chorus, the voices could be felt as much as heard.

Then, they stopped.

A silence fell that even the storm outside couldn't drown. Rain hammered against the roof, but it might as well have been miles away. The air thickened, still and waiting.

The lead figure lifted his torch. Flame rippled and bent in the draft, casting wild shadows across the walls and faces. The glow caught on glass, on eyes, on the sharp edges of fear.

It was clear now. They weren't looking for a target—they'd already found one.

She stood at the back, half-shrouded by a partition. Young. Alone. A hood shadowed her face, short black hair tucked neatly beneath it. Kael recognized her now. He'd noticed her earlier, sitting off to the side, eyes tracing everyone who walked through the door. Paranoia, it turned out. He'd taken her for a Crysolite addict chasing a fix, though no bar this polished would ever serve that.

Her hand hovered near her side, frozen between fight and flight. The only hint of surprise was in her stillness—too calm, too focused.

The torchlight found her, and the moment shattered.

She flipped the nearest table, sending bottles and glasses skittering across the floor, and darted across the room. Liquid splashed across luminous tiles that pulsed faintly with movement, each step leaving a ripple of light beneath her boots.

Then everything broke loose.

The bar erupted in motion. Civilians turned hunters, shifting with the quiet efficiency of people who knew exactly what side they were supposed to be on.

From his seat, Kael tracked her through the chaos. The trajectory was obvious. He'd clocked the windows along the back wall earlier, the kind built to impress investors, not survive impact. There was no telling what waited on the other side. He'd already dismissed them as a way out.

That's where she was headed.

Her stride gave it away. The narrowing focus, the growing desperation, all fixated on the wrong escape. She hadn't scoped her exits from the start. Rookie mistake. And it was going to cost her.

The crowd was catching on, too. A few had already started to move, closing in to cut her off before she reached the glass.

One man reached her first, grabbing her shoulder. He was strong, but too confident. Her body pivoted as a glint of steel flashed in her hand, catching the light for a heartbeat before she drove it down.

The blade sank deep into his thigh, catching bone. His scream tore through the noise, raw and primal.

She didn't hesitate. She shoved him aside and ran.

Two men moved to cut her off, with one stepping into her path, the other closing from the side. The first wore a tailored business suit threaded with faint circuitry. The other bore the mark of the Flame, a thin subdermal implant beneath each eye that shimmered faintly, like embers under skin. A devotee, most likely as radical as the group who just entered the room. Perhaps even more so.

The woman slowed, breath sharp and uneven. Her eyes perilously flicked left, then right, seeking any potential exit route.

There wasn't one.

Kael recognized the signs—the tremor in her stance, the twitch in her fingers, the way her knees faltered under adrenaline. Her body was giving out. She wasn't trained, and she wasn't old. She was a Twisted. The kind of immortal made in alley clinics and black-market labs. A desperate attempt to stretch her life just a little further. Now, it was about to end it.

Before the woman could turn, the devotee was already moving. He broke from the crowd in a blur, cloak sweeping the glowing floor, eyes flaring with the faint orange shimmer of subdermal flame. He caught her mid-spin and slammed her sideways into a table. The impact collapsed it instantly. Drinks toppled, glass exploding across the luminous floor in a spill of light and liquor.

She screamed and thrashed, pinned tight as the man locked his arms around her, crushing her elbows to her sides. He held fast, face clenched with effort as she kicked and writhed in his grip.

"You're a bunch of fanatics!" she spat, her voice splitting through the noise.

Gasps rippled through the crowd—but not all were shocked. Some hissed in disapproval, others shouted her down, spitting words like *traitor* and *blasphemer*. Whether out of fear or faith, it didn't matter. They weren't with her.

"You don't have to bow to them!" she shouted, thrashing in the man's hold. "The Syndicate will stand with anyone brave enough to rise. This city belongs to us!"

She lashed out, elbowing the devotee in his chin. The impact made his subdermals flare, briefly, violently casting a flash of molten light across his face. He grunted, jaw locking, but his grip didn't break.

The cloaked figures remained still. They simply watched, eyes fixed, as if the outcome had already been written.

Then came her final words, spit like venom through ragged breaths.

"You Flamebearers haunt this Earth like a plague—one whose day will soon come."

She dug her heels in, but it was no use. The devotee's hand came down hard between her shoulders. The sound was a sharp, dull cracking thud that cut through the noise.

She collapsed to her knees, air bursting from her lungs in a jagged gasp.

The lead Flamebearer lifted a hand with eerie calm. At the gesture, the four others moved as one. Crimson robes swept forward, their motion fluid, precise, almost rehearsed. They encircled her in silence.

A sea of red closed around her, methodical and absolute.

She tried to rise, but it was a feeble attempt. Her body trembled, whatever strength she had left bleeding out of her, muscle by muscle, breath by breath. Only her coughing remained with a hollow, broken rhythm that echoed through the bar, brittle and final, as if the world itself had gone still to witness what came next.

Then, the leader moved.

His white cloak hung heavy with rain, the hood drawn low, but Kael could still make out the ruin of his face beneath. His dark skin was marred by burns, old and new, uneven and cracked where flame had made its mark. To the devotee, pain was proof of faith.

And his eyes—white, completely devoid of color. The mark of someone who'd spent too long staring into burning Thanium.

The Flame made zealots of them all, but this one had looked straight into it and never looked away.

An Inquisitor.

As he stepped forward, each step sent the hollow thump of his ash-bound boots echoing through the bar's hollow quiet. Kael's gaze dropped, catching the hem of his cloak. It was stained gray, blackened with ash, and singed from embers that had flown too close. It was a residue that no amount of cleansing rain could ever wash away.

He stopped beside her. The air itself seemed to wait.

Without hesitation, he reached down, fingers twisting into her hair. With one brutal motion, he wrenched her head back, forcing her gaze skyward. Her neck snapped taut, spine arching as her face was thrown toward the ceiling. Her eyes locked with the flame and the room exhaled a single, collective breath.

Her eyes, from the pupil to the farthest edge of the sclera, were completely black. They were like a void that consumed every trace of color. No reflection, no glimmer of light, only an endless abyss staring back.

Corrupted.

The Inquisitor inhaled slowly, as if drawing in the last breath of the condemned. When he spoke, it was with a voice hollow and final, as if the words themselves had been etched into stone long ago.

"You bear the Mark of the Corrupted."

He lifted the torch slightly, the fire swelling in response, writhing and snapping as though it could smell her.

"You are condemned to Pyric Damnation."

The words hung in the air like a spark waiting for fuel. Kael's eyes flicked toward the exit behind the counter. He'd marked it the moment he walked in—one narrow door, half-shadowed, easy enough to reach if chaos hit. In a space this tight, their ritual could turn the whole place into a furnace. He wasn't planning to burn with her.

Then, the chanting resumed. It rose, louder this time, swelling into a rhythmic, unyielding chorus. The cloaked figures stepped forward in unison, their formation tightening like a living noose closing around the woman.

Then the crowd followed.

First, a murmur from the edge of the bar. Then another. And another. From every corner, more joined in, the words low but fervent, echoing with practiced cadence. Even the man beside Kael whispered the lines, eyes half-lidded, as if caught in trance.

Kael dipped his head low, keeping his gaze fixed on the counter. He had witnessed this kind of fanaticism before—too many times to count. A decade ago, he had been in the Capital. It hadn't been like this. The Flamebearers had operated beneath the surface, ever present but never unchecked, their influence spreading in shadows, not open streets.

Then, they had whispered their doctrine. Now, they screamed it. Their fanaticism was on full display. Not even the pretense of restraint remained.

His muscles tensed. The narrow door behind the bar was still there, still open. This was his chance. While the crowd sang themselves into a frenzy, he could slip out before the fire started.

He shifted, ready to move—

But he was too late.

The moment was gone. The room had changed.

A burst of orange light split the room. In the space of a breath, fire leapt from the center and engulfed her. The sound was wet, a hiss beneath the roar, as fabric and skin caught in the same instant. She arched once, back snapping, limbs thrashing. Then the blaze took her whole as her silhouette flailed inside the blaze. The heat slammed through the bar, swallowing the air itself. It was a fire meant to devour, not just kill.

The scent hit Kael instantly. Burning hair, scorched flesh, and the acrid sting of synthetic fibers melted into the air. It crawled down his throat and clung there, thick and greasy, until every breath tasted of smoke and oil.

Her screams tore through the bar, raw and primal. The sound dragged Kael backward—to another fire, another square, long ago. He'd thought she was one of the damned that night, lost to the same flames.

She wasn't. Yet, every pyre since had felt the same.

But even that agonized wail couldn't rise above the chorus of chanting that had completely consumed the room. Her cries rose until they merged with the chant.

The room wasn't just reacting, it was actively participating in this ritual of fiery death.

Voices blended into one relentless rhythm, swelling and collapsing like the pull of a tide. The words had no mercy, no hesitation—only faith.

The room wasn't just reacting; it was enthralled. Firelight leapt across walls slick with heat and shadow, casting the scene in violent motion. The woman's silhouette convulsed inside the blaze, her outline writhing and dissolving as the flames devoured her.

Most in the crowd raised trembling hands toward the fire, their lips moving in broken praise. The devotee who had helped subdue her now knelt before the pyre, eyes wide, transfixed by the burning figure. Ash fell around him like gray snow, clinging to his hair and shoulders as he whispered the chant over and over. The heat, smoke, and faith all seemed to feed the inferno.

Yet not all were so consumed. Along the edges, Kael caught faces twisted in guilt and fear, their eyes darting as if hoping the Flame wouldn't turn its gaze on them next. They tried to hide it, bowing their heads, mouthing the words. But the terror was plain to see. The closeness of the brutality had shaken them to their core.

But not Kael. He'd lived through too many purges, too many pyres, to be moved by spectacle. The only thing the years had burned out of him was shock.

Then it came.

A blinding white flash detonated from within the blaze, obliterating the orange glow and casting the room into a stark, otherworldly brilliance.

Kael turned away sharply, blinking against the impossible brightness. His vision flooded with ghost-white static, his ears filling with a sharp, high-pitched shriek that drilled into the core of his skull.

The bar vanished in the radiance. Screens crackled and died. Lights flickered once, then went dark. The crowd dropped their heads, shielding their eyes.

All but the Flamebearers. They remained statues in the storm. Their pale eyes gleamed in the firelight, unblinking and unmoving. It was as if they saw something no one else could. For a brief, harrowing moment, the space was no longer a bar. It had become a cathedral of pure fanaticism.

And then it was over.

The light collapsed in on itself, vanishing with a breathless hiss. The room was plunged into an unnatural, suffocating darkness.

The cloaked figures bowed their heads in eerie synchrony, their voices dying out as one. The final echoes of their chant were swallowed whole by the silence, leaving only the lingering scent of smoke and charred flesh.

Silence ruled the room now. Not that of peace, but the kind that follows devastation. For a moment, the room sat suspended in its own aftermath, as if holding its breath, bathing in the fervor that had just consumed it. No one moved. No one breathed.

Then, faintly, life returned.

The lights stuttered back on, weak at first, as if reluctant to rejoin the living. A low hum returned to the air as the subtle soundscape of civilization reclaiming its place, indifferent to what had just unfolded.

Above Kael, the holographic display hummed back to life.

“Report suspicious activity to the nearest patrol. The law requires all citizens to remain vigilant.”

The automated voice was crisp, sterile, and eerily normal. Its words felt almost cruel in their banality, a bureaucratic whisper dropped atop a scene still reeking of fire and death.

Kael looked toward the spot where the woman had stood. Only ash remained, a faint, misshapen smear on the floor. It was the final trace of someone who dared to exist in a world that denied her very being.

For a moment, nothing moved. The air hung heavy with smoke and silence, the only sound the faint crackle of what the fire had left behind. Then, the Flamebearers turned and drifted toward the door. Their footsteps made no sound, yet their presence dragged behind them like smoke.

Flecks of blackened soot clung to their cloaks, scattered like ashes from a dying fire. The stains ran deep, woven into the folds of their robes. They carried the remnants of their own fanaticism, draped across their shoulders like a badge of devotion.

The gold-trimmed leader followed at a measured pace, last to leave. As he passed, Kael caught his first clear glimpse of the man’s cloak from behind. An ornate sigil of a dagger encircled by a ring of flame. Kael knew it instantly.

This wasn’t just any Inquisitor. This was the Inquisitor of the Capital, the one tasked with keeping the city pure. He led the purges. Rooted out the *unwanted*s. Cleansed the citizenry of any touched by immortality, whether they bore the Mark, consorted with those who did, or dared to shield one. None were spared once the Inquisitor’s gaze fell upon them.

He didn’t wait for orders. Cared little for protocol. The Inquisitor and his Flamebearers operated with impunity, right under the nose of the Order.

But what he really did was trade in fear like currency—and business was always good.

As they neared the door, a faint murmur began to creep back into the bar. The tension had eased just enough for conversation to resume in hushed tones.

Kael didn’t move, but he wasn’t still either. His muscles coiled beneath the surface, ready. His eyes tracked higher, past the shadow of his hood, studying every step, every gesture.

He was preparing himself, ready to take action if necessary. He needed to be certain they were truly leaving, and that no one else would take their place.

As they pushed the door open, rain whispered against the threshold, its steady rhythm seeping back into the silence. A faint gust carried the scent of wet pavement into the room as the Flamebearers stepped outside, their formation precise and deliberate.

For a moment, the bar seemed to hold its breath.

Then, the leader's head jerked sharply, turning back toward Kael with an unnatural precision. Kael met his eyes for the briefest moment. Most Flamebearers had that pale blue sheen. The Inquisitor's were worse—white, depthless. The eyes of something that hunted in absolutes.

Kael eased his gaze to his drink, breathing steady. Muscles loose. Mind sharp.

This could be it.

His hand slipped beneath his coat, fingers wrapping around the worn grip of the pistol. It whirred faintly at his touch, warming against his palm as he tightened his hold. The weapon was ready. So was he.

The seconds stretched thin, each one drawn tight with the weight of a decision not yet made. Was this it—the moment he'd spent a century dodging? Would it end here, cornered in a bar, surrounded by zealots and ritual flame?

His eyes flicked to the ash still smoldering on the floor.

Her stand had been impulsive. Unarmed. A flicker of defiance swallowed by doctrine and fire. That would not be him. He would not go quiet. He would not vanish in someone else's crusade.

He'd carve his own exit with steel and blood. And if it ended here, he'd make damn sure it was loud, brutal, and unforgettable.

Then, a voice broke the silence.

"We had no idea, Inquisitor Scion," the bartender stammered, words spilling out in a desperate rush. "We didn't know one of *them* was here. This... this has never happened before. I swear it."

His voice faltered, thinning to a rasp. "Please... forgive us," he pleaded, eyes downcast. "This establishment has always maintained a perfect record—seventy years without a single infraction. We've always cooperated with the Order and the Flame. We serve a devout clientele. You must know that."

The Inquisitor shifted, the soft rustle of his cloak louder than the room itself. Slowly, deliberately, he turned toward the bartender. He said nothing. But he studied him, slowly and methodically. His gaze moved with an eerie precision, as if peeling away layers of skin and spirit to weigh the guilt beneath.

The room didn't breathe. No one moved. No one spoke. They were caught in the moment. A moment that hovered between judgment and reprieve, between fire and silence. None of them knew which would come.

Kael felt it pressing in from all sides, the air wound tight with waiting. The bar had thought it was over. Thought they had been spared. But the Inquisitor was still here, watching, deciding.

Kael kept still. He knew better. But his eyes worked the room. Every figure. Every hand. Every glance. He measured the ground he'd need to cover, marked the faces eager enough to play vigilante if things broke bad. At the first twitch of movement, there'd be no hesitation.

The Inquisitor's head dipped—subtle, final. He turned, and the column moved as one. The door shut behind them with a muted thud, leaving a silence thicker than before.

Kael didn't relax. Not yet. He watched. He waited. Some verdicts ended in fire. Others left only a spark—and sparks had a way of catching.

Then, as if washing away what had just transpired, a pulse of synthetic bass rippled against the walls. The bright, hollow synthetic melodies did their best to reassert normalcy. It wasn't enough to erase what they'd seen, but it gave people something else to focus on.

"I've never witnessed a damnation before," the man behind Kael murmured, his tone laced with awe. "That was... incredible."

"They deserve to burn," a woman nearby snapped. "They ruined this world."

Kael didn't turn to either of them. The room was still buzzing with tension, a fragile balance between those eager to forget and those still hungry for more.

He could leave now. Slip out and fade into the Capital streets before anyone thought to look twice.

No. Not yet. With the Flamebearers prowling the streets, he wouldn't be safe. Not in his current state.

The stakes had risen. One wrong move, one misstep, and it would all end here. This meeting was no longer just important, it was critical. He couldn't leave. Not yet. He still needed to order the White Horizon.

Kael drew a slow breath. Kept his hand steady. No need to fight instinct. Control was instinct. He had seen far worse than this.

His gaze drifted sideways to the sleek, polished mirror lining the side of the bar. The glass was flawless, reflecting the dim neon glow with perfect clarity.

His face stared back at him, sharp and defined beneath the ambient light. But his eyes—his eyes were unmistakable.

Deep-set, striking, impossible to overlook. A void where there should have been color. They were black. Just like the woman who had burned. It was a reminder that he was quickly running out of time.

He lingered on the reflection a beat too long, studying the man staring back. The choices behind those eyes. The cost of them.

Then a voice cut through, close and unexpected.

"White Horizon."

The bartender gave a slight nod, then moved with practiced efficiency. No questions. No delay.

Kael barely turned his head, just enough to catch a glimpse without drawing attention.

The voice had come from a woman standing just next to where he was seated at the bar. She had blonde hair, cropped short, and a calm, unreadable expression. A local, by the look of her. Could have been anyone.

The jacket stood out. Bright red synth-leather, the kind that caught light even in a room like this. A choice made to be noticed, or a mistake made by someone who hadn't learned better.

Was she the contact? The one meant to lead him to the doctor? Or another immortal, drifting through the shadows, desperate to stay unseen?

He filed the thought. No answers yet. Only possibilities.

The Order's official terminations had ended nearly twenty years ago, but the hunt never stopped. Any immortal still walking had defied their assigned termination date. They were enemies of the state now. Targets. And the agents sent to erase them worked fast, clean, and quiet.

That was if you were lucky.

Not all hunters wore state colors. Tonight had proven that again. There were others, the ones who didn't wait for trials. The ones who set fires and called it faith.

A faint scrape of glass sliding across polished stone snapped him back to attention.

The bartender had returned, setting down a milky white concoction that swirled with flecks of iridescence, like stardust trapped in cream.

"One White Horizon," he said. His voice was low, almost too casual. "For those who know where they're going."

Another silent nod passed between them.

Kael hesitated, glancing down the bar, then raised two fingers slightly in an attempt to catch the bartender's eye. But the man had already turned away, ignoring him completely.

Before Kael could react, the woman reached out and slid the drink down in front of him, as if it had always been his.

She rose from her seat with a fluid motion that felt almost rehearsed. As she passed, she whispered.

"Come with me."

Kael's gaze flicked right, tracking her movement.

She was already moving, slipping toward the back of the bar, her steps smooth and unhurried, like someone who already knew how this night would unfold. There was no hesitation, no second glance.

She didn't need one. She knew he would follow.

Was this the contact he was supposed to meet?

He gripped the glass tightly in his hand, feeling its chill seep into his skin. The question barely had time to settle. He couldn't linger on the thought. Choices had to be made. Standing still was its own kind of death.

Without hesitation, he slipped into the crowd, weaving through the dimly lit bar toward the back, toward where the woman had disappeared.

As he turned the corner, he risked a glance over his shoulder.

The bar had already returned to its pre-damnation vibe. Conversations hummed, drinks flowed, and the heavy bass once again throbbed through the walls. It was as if the past few minutes had been nothing more than an inconvenient disruption to an otherwise ordinary night.

He lifted the glass and let the White Horizon touch his lips. The taste was sweeter than he expected, smooth at first, then sharp and silvery like starlight caught in ice. For a fleeting moment it was clean, pure possibility distilled into liquid form, a blank horizon waiting to be written on.

He swallowed, feeling the chill slip down his throat and spread through him, threading into his veins like liquid frost. The sweetness vanished, leaving only the metallic echo of what came after.

Then he moved for the exit.

Capital citizens were nothing if not unfazed by violence. If that's what two hundred years of order can achieve, perhaps they deserved it.

Chapter 2

As Kael stepped into the night, the door clicked shut behind him sealing off the last warmth he'd feel tonight.

Rain hammered the alleyway, thick, cold, and relentless. Within seconds, it punched through his hood, soaking the fabric and sliding down the back of his neck like a wire of ice. He didn't flinch. The sting of it jolted him awake in a way the bar's warmth never could.

Even through the curtain of rain, the noise came, not in distinct pieces, but as a single, restless tide of movement, machinery, and voices. All of it bled together in a low, ceaseless roar that pressed in from every direction.

This was the Capital's welcome. Sharp. Unforgiving. It was a stark reminder that out here, in the streets, he would never be alone.

The narrow alley before him stretched between towering glass facades. Their mirrored surfaces caught the city's glow and fractured it in a thousand directions. A kaleidoscope of hues bled across puddles and walls alike. The colors shifted with every movement, turning the alley into a prism of motion and shadow.

Above it all, the sleek, seamless buildings stretched into the sky, vanishing into the clouds above. Green veils of engineered ivy wound through steel latticework and suspended walkways, their growth regulated by embedded nutrient circuits. Data spines ran like veins beneath glass surfaces, pulsing faintly with the flow of the city's neural grid. The architects sold it as renewal, a rebirth of harmony between nature and machine. Kael saw it for what it was—just another layer of gloss painted over old bones. The Capital knew how to dress its scars.

Kael's gaze fell to the street below. The woman was already at the alley's edge, her outline dissolving into the rain and flickering light.

She didn't signal. Didn't look back. Just walked like she knew he'd follow.

His boots hit the runoff hard, splashing through shallow streams as he quickened his pace. With a final glance, he stepped out from the alley's shadow and into the storm.

Around him, people moved quickly through the rain, huddled beneath awnings or slipping through the wash of holographic light spilling from open doorways. Most wore night gear composed of hooded jackets and glowing wrist displays, thin bands of light pulsing softly with data streams and biometric reads. The latest nightlife trends bled light through soaked fabric.

They wore the city like a second skin. The newest shine. The latest distraction. All of it chasing relevance beneath the glow of a regime that sold them stability for a price.

Kael scanned them with practiced disdain. Not a threat in sight. No patrols. Just the restless flow of citizens too polished to care what bled beneath the surface.

A flash of red caught his eye.

She'd pulled up her hood, blending into the stream of bodies. But the bright red jacket cut through the blur of rain and light like a marker in the dark. It moved with purpose, weaving between strangers, always just out of reach.

Kael moved.

He slid past a cluster of loiterers beneath an awning, sidestepped a food cart, and narrowed the gap with long, quiet strides. The rain masked his approach. No one noticed. No one cared.

A few more steps and he was beside her.

"Don't look at me," she said, eyes fixed straight ahead. "Just a few more blocks. Blend in. Act natural."

She didn't break stride. Didn't glance his way.

Kael matched her pace. His steps were measured as his eyes swept the crowd without focus, shifting across faces that never met him.

The rain masked the sound, but the city's pulse was louder now. People moved in currents, their paths intersecting for seconds before parting again, each one caught in their own silent orbit. The air shimmered with motion, color, and damp electricity. Kael moved through it all without breaking stride, like a ghost among the living.

Above them, the holographic billboards loomed like celestial sentinels over the sprawling cityscape, their light spilling into the air in radiant cascades of color. Millions of colors of liquid light fought back the night.

The air around the projections seemed to vibrate with their intensity, a faint hum emanating from the energy fields that kept them suspended. On rainy nights such as these, the beams of light would pierce the haze like neon knives.

To passing pedestrians, the displays felt almost tangible, as if the holograms might ripple under their fingertips if they could reach them. Yet, they towered above the masses, untouchable, unwavering, eternal.

Some billboards whispered subtle messages, their light cool and enticing, drawing attention with understated elegance. These were advertisements for an array of data-driven devices, body modifications, and medical procedures. Everything was for sale. Well...almost.

A flash of crimson split the sky.

Kael's eyes flicked upward. A massive display unfolded across the face of a skyscraper, flooding the street with blood-red light. Unlike the others, it didn't sell. It commanded.

"Only the Flame is eternal," the voice boomed through the rain. "Darkness must be extinguished for balance to return."

Holographic fire twisted through the haze, crawling across the skyline like something alive and hungry. The mark of the Celestial Flame burned bright above the city—its reach impossible to ignore. Once, their sermons stayed confined to temples and broadcast halls. Now their gospel bled straight into the streets.

Kael kept moving. Kept the pace. But the shift in the air wasn't lost on him. The same chant from the bar rose faintly again, carried on the wet wind like an echo that refused to die.

The Temple had abandoned subtlety long ago. Damnations in the middle of bars proved as much. Once, the Order ruled through precision and control. Now, the Flame ruled through fear, and fire burned louder than any piece of propaganda ever could.

Then, a low mechanical hum threaded through the storm. Subtle at first—almost lost beneath the relentless rain.

But Kael caught it.

He looked up. A drone slipped through the mist—sleek, angular, its frame outlined by stuttering light. The wingspan stretched nearly the width of a man, blades slicing the air with a steady, resonant whir. Beneath its hull, a faint orange glow pulsed from the propulsion vents, heating the rain into steam that curled upward like smoke.

It slowed, hovering above the crowd with precision no human could match. Too smooth. Too deliberate. Like it was thinking.

Kael adjusted his stride. Shifted left, casual, blending with the flow. No good. The drone mirrored him, descending inch by inch. The hum deepened, pressing against the chest like a physical weight.

The drone dipped lower, engines whining against the downpour. Then a thin red beam snapped to life at its core, refracting through the sheets of rain. The light fractured, scattering into a thousand twitching lines as it tried to hold focus.

Kael's jaw tightened. The beam locked on his chest, crawled up to his face, then swung toward the woman beside him.

His hand slid beneath his coat, fingers brushing the worn grip of his pistol.

"Don't," she hissed, eyes forward, voice low and sharp. "Do that and we're both dead."

She didn't slow. "Stay calm. Look ahead. EchoEyes can't scan clean in this much rain."

They kept walking. Step for step. The drone followed, the red beam dragging across them like a hot wire. Kael's hand stayed on the grip. He didn't ease. He didn't trust the call to her. Not in the Capital. Not ever.

Then a faint pulse rippled through the air. Something in her pocket glowed green, barely visible through the soaked fabric. A high, needling whine pricked Kael's ears—here and gone in a heartbeat.

The drone stuttered mid-hover. Its red beam flickered once, twice—then cut out completely. The machine drifted upward, its blades howling once before fading into the mist.

Kael kept his eyes down, following the woman's footsteps through the torrent. Every drop that struck landed with such a weight it seemed to smother the city's hum until only the rhythm of his own steps remained. He breathed slowly, steady. Even gone, the drone felt near. Its presence vibrated somewhere in his nerves. His grip tightened at the sensation. Old habits. Old scars.

He lifted his gaze, scanning the sky through the curtain of rain. Nothing but shifting mist and the blur of light bled from the skyline above. Still, he waited, eyes tracing the rooftops, the hollow gaps between buildings, listening for that hum that never really left.

A gust tore down the street, scattering sheets of rain sideways. He caught only vapor and light, the city's glow bending through the downpour like broken glass. Gusts like these would have sent the EchoEyes back to their high roosts, the hovering Command Nests that anchored each district's surveillance grid. From there, they watched everything—every street, every movement. But in weather like this, even the Capital's eyes could go blind.

Only then did he exhale. His fingers loosened. The tension bled out of his arm as he slipped his hand free from beneath his coat, the pistol's cold weight fading from his grip. He let it go.

"You seriously need to keep it together," the woman muttered over her shoulder. Her voice cut through the rain, sharp and impatient. "Don't tell me that was your first time dealing with an EchoEye."

She turned without waiting for a reply, her coat whipping slightly as she slipped back into the rain-soaked crowd. Her pace was brisk and unaffected, like nothing had happened.

Kael watched her go for a moment, contemplating if he truly wanted to follow. He couldn't stand her. Cold, detached, all bite and no caution. She was the kind who'd call you a fool five seconds before getting herself killed, an amateur who thought confidence could pass for experience. Too young, too polished. The Capital bred her kind by the thousands.

It was people like her that reminded him why he hated coming back to this place. Maybe even more than the drones.

"Should've finished that drink," he muttered under his breath as he started walking again.

They moved in silence for several minutes. The rain still fell hard, but the sound changed—less of a roar now, more of a steady hiss against stone and glass. The crowd had begun to thin, the flood of bodies narrowing as they left the Capital's main arteries and slipped into its smaller veins. The pulse of the city weakened here, its energy stretched thin through the connective tissue that bound one district to the next.

Kael noted the shift without breaking stride. The storefronts were different here—less high-end fashion, more gimmick gear and discount tech. Clothing that tried too hard to look cutting-edge, gadgets at least a decade out of step.

He clocked the blocks as they passed. Nine, maybe ten from the bar. It didn't feel like the same route he'd taken last time. Then again, places like this never stayed in one spot for long. Moving was how you avoided being found, how you stayed one step ahead of the wrong kind of attention. It was a tactic he understood all too well.

His eyes stayed fixed on the woman ahead as she guided their path through narrowing alleyways. The city felt closer here, the walls damp with reflected light. His senses stayed sharp, tension coiled just beneath the calm.

This operation had to go clean. If it failed, the breakdown would spread, and his eyes would mark him for what he was. But if it worked, he'd have time to disappear, to move through the Order unseen. By sunrise, he'd be gone from the Capital, back on the trail, chasing the only thing that still mattered — *her*.

Kael's gaze drifted sideways as they passed a storefront glowing pale blue behind a rain-smeared pane of smartglass. Inside, mannequins turned slowly on rotating platforms, each draped in translucent fabric that shimmered through digital patterns every few seconds.

A sign blinked above them in soft cursive. **CHROMATICA — Moodwear for the Modern Mind.**

Beneath it, a live display tracked the biometrics of passersby, shifting the clothing in real time to match their emotional state. Kael caught his reflection.

The jacket it wore bled into a stark black, then flickered with pulses of red and fractured streaks of electric blue—violent, erratic, like storm fronts clashing across synthetic skin.

He looked away.

Without a word, the woman veered left, cutting down a narrow alley. Kael followed, boots splashing as they slipped into deeper shadow.

The sound of the street fell away behind them. A new scent crept through the damp air—sharp and spiced. Grilled thal-root, if he had to guess. Seared in synth-oil, dusted with black fen spice.

He wasn't some cultured connoisseur. Never had the taste or the credits for that. But a life on the move taught you how to read a street by what it fed its people.

This was western fare, blended for Capital palates. Cheap, filling, fast. Street food from the lower tiers, meant to cut through the cold and stick in the blood.

Movement ahead caught Kael's eye. A figure stood half-hidden against the wall near the base of the alley, posture relaxed but deliberate. Even through the rain, he recognized the stance for what it was—guard detail.

His hand hovered near his coat, reflex more than intent.

"They're with us," the woman murmured without looking back. Her voice barely carried through the rain.

Ahead, a short staircase sank beneath the alley, tucked behind a seamless glass-panel railing that caught the glow of passing light. Water streamed down the steps in thin ribbons, pooling softly at the base, as if the city were trying to wash something away.

The woman descended without pause, her silhouette framed by the ambient glow before it vanished into the dark below.

"Stay back," she said, her voice low but firm.

Kael slowed, instincts still burning. He felt the eyes on him. The figure by the wall hadn't moved or looked away. The man was sizing him up, reading him the way soldiers and smugglers did when they needed to know who would break first. Kael didn't remember a guard like this last time. It was a clear sign they were worried, another reminder that things were changing in the Capital. Everyone was on edge now.

She stepped up to the door and tilted her face toward a recessed panel. A red beam lanced out, scanning her eyes in a slow, deliberate arc. The light caught the edges of her features, painting them in sharp, angular detail.

A soft beep. Then a hiss escaped as the door unlocked.

"Move. Now," she commanded, motioning toward the doorway.

Kael stepped into the threshold.

Whatever waited inside, it had better be what he needed. Because out here in the open, he was exposed and running out of options.

Chapter 3

The corridor was narrow and cold, lit by thin blue strips that ran low along the condensation-lined walls. Thick cables snaked across the floor in uneven bundles, their translucent casings pulsing with a slow, amber current. A siphon unit clung to the wall where the lines converged. Its half-open housing revealed crystalline nodes arranged in neat, careful rows. It drew power from the feed but looped the output back through a converter that masked the pull, replacing what it took with spent energy.

These units weren't common. They were clever, expensive, and dangerously volatile. One misaligned transfer rod and the whole block would be obliterated, let alone this sublevel.

The walls had been reinforced with dull metal panels etched in faint geometric lines. Kael recognized the pattern as shielding, the kind designed to distort energy signals from above-ground scanners. From the outside, this place left no trace at all.

But up close, the seams showed. The cables and panels weren't properly sealed, patched together from whatever parts they could find. Thin wisps of energy bled through the cracks in the casings, turning the air warm and hazy as they drifted by. Each pulse sent a faint tremor through the floor that Kael could feel in the soles of his rain-soaked boots.

He moved cautiously, his nerves still tuned to the rhythm of the world above. Down here, though, the sound had vanished. The storm was just a memory, sealed behind layers of metal and shielding. All that remained were faint voices somewhere ahead.

As he drew closer, the voices sharpened, threaded with the soft hiss of machinery. The corridor bent ahead, the light shifting from blue to a sterile white that spilled faintly around the corner. He slowed as his left hand brushed the wall for balance. His other hand hovered near the holster at his side.

Had the pathrunner led him to the right place? There was only one way to find out. He stepped forward.

As he turned the corner, the hallway opened into a cramped, cluttered room. Bright, clinical lighting lit the space with surgical precision, casting clean lines across stainless surfaces and matte-white panels. The air smelled of antiseptic and ionized metal. Sharp, sterile. Almost too clean for a place that shouldn't officially exist.

Several curtained bays lined the walls, their dividers made of soft, high-grade polymer that diffused light but muffled nothing. The equipment here was orderly and well-kept, humming with quiet efficiency. Not flashy, but not cheap either. Monitors glowed softly in the dim, pulsing with biometric data. Adaptive overlays flickered through neural scan readouts and genetic stability charts. These were older models, retooled for a different kind of patient. The official clinics would never show screens like these. Not when the law demanded the Mark be reported, not cleansed.

He took one careful step into the room, eyes narrowing as they adjusted to the glare.

“Well, look what the storm dragged in.”

The voice came from behind him.

“That’s a face I thought I’d seen the last of.”

Kael froze for a second. Then the tension in his shoulders eased as he slowly removed his hand from his side. The corner of his mouth tugged upward despite himself. He turned.

From behind one of the curtains, a familiar face leaned out, eyes catching the sterile light.

“You don’t look a day older than the last time I saw you,” she said, stepping fully into view.

“What’s it been, Kael?”

She smiled faintly at his silence, studying him with the same sharpness he remembered. Kael’s gaze traced over her, taking in the changes time hadn’t managed to hide. Her skin was a deep, warm brown, lined subtly at the corners of her mouth and eyes. Her hair, once black, was pulled back into tight grey rows that framed a face both steady and precise.

A faint glint of a neural implant hummed faintly beneath the skin near her temple, pulsing in rhythm with her heartbeat. It was the kind used to keep synaptic speed from dulling with age. Practical, but costly. Typical of the Capital, where growing old gracefully meant upgrading what time eroded.

“Ten years,” Kael said.

She nodded, as if confirming a private calculation.

“You’re still good at what you do, Doc,” he said. “But I couldn’t wait any longer.”

She let out a short laugh and shook her head. “Well, you picked a hell of a time to crawl back into the Capital. The Order’s throwing their Two hundred year birthday bash and that’s when you decide to roll into town?”

Kael offered a shrug, pointing to his eyes. “This is the only clock I go by.”

The doctor slid closer on her stool. She leaned in, eyes narrowing as she studied him. Up close, Kael noticed more changes. The soft brown of her eyes was gone. In its place were augmented lenses that shifted in faint refractions as they focused. Tiny apertures adjusted with every blink, responding faster than any natural reflex. They could magnify, analyze, and see far more than nature ever allowed.

He caught himself wondering when she’d gotten them. Probably around the same time as the neural implant. Yet another safeguard against the creeping slowdown of age. Her work wasn’t cheap or easy, but it was flawless. She was the reason he’d come back to the Capital instead of

risking a backroom cleansing in one of the outer provinces. He'd gone through checkpoints, scanners, and half a dozen forged clearances just to reach her because she was the best. She took her craft seriously enough to rebuild herself just to keep doing it right. He'd always respect that.

For a moment, she said nothing, her new eyes tracking the dark streaks threading through his irises, reading what the years had done to him.

"Yeah," she murmured. "I'm seeing a destabilization rate of at least seventy percent in the peripheral lattice." She leaned back slightly, tone softening. "The breakdown's accelerating faster than before."

Kael shifted, unsurprised. For weeks, he'd felt the dull ache that came when the Thanium in his system started to fracture. It hadn't been this bad ten years ago. Not even close.

She pulled back slightly, tapping her fingers against the armrest of a worn chair beside a small table. "This is going to take a deeper cleanse for sure. You should've come sooner."

Kael moved toward the chair and sat, though his posture stayed rigid. The frame was reinforced — stainless steel fused with those same dull, geometric shielding plates he'd seen in the hallway. Even the ceiling above was lined with them, panels layered in overlapping rows like scales, sealing the room inside itself.

The chair reclined with a soft hydraulic hiss. Kael let himself lean back, but only enough to give the machine access, not control.

A pair of articulated grips slid out from the armrests, closing around his wrists with practiced precision. Not tight — but firm. Anchoring. A second set clasped across his forearms, adjusting to the shape of his bones as if reading him.

He felt the pull then — a slow, subtle tension drawing his shoulders and spine into alignment against the table. The device wasn't restraining him exactly. More like it was holding him in place for something that didn't tolerate movement.

Kael stared up at the ceiling, at the rows of shielding plates arranged like a second skin over the metal. The room felt smaller now. Closed. Quiet.

"Loved the escort you sent, by the way. Real personable. Where do I leave her five-star review for charm?"

The doctor let out a short laugh, already turning back to the console. "She's good at what she does. Not much of a talker, but she got you here in one piece. Considering what's happening above ground, that's a miracle."

She adjusted a few settings on the device beside him. Blue and amber lights pulsed in a steady rhythm across its interface, cycling through diagnostics Kael didn't bother to read.

"The Order's out in force. Increased patrols, rolling blackouts, checkpoints on every third corner. Supplies are tighter than ever." She paused, glancing at him. "You really shouldn't be here now."

Kael exhaled through his nose, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"I know."

The room held a sterile stillness that didn't soothe. It pressed in. The smell of burning retinas filled the air with the occasional groans of patients. It was all metal, all memory, all expectation.

What could he expect? People like him didn't get treatment in glass towers and polished clinics. Not when the procedure was the illegal kind that held a death sentence.

"If it were up to me," he said quietly, "I'd never come back."

A deep, guttural cry rose from a bay across the room — too low for a scream, too raw for language.

The doctor stilled, her hands pausing mid-adjustment. She looked toward the sound and waited.

When it broke off into ragged quiet, she gave a small, resigned nod and returned to Kael.

"If I could manage that for anyone, I'd be a rich woman. We can barely keep up with the influx. We've raised prices three times in this past year alone."

Her gaze softened as she adjusted the angle of his jaw. "But don't worry," she added, "you still have the old rate."

Above them, gears whispered to life. A suspended apparatus slid along a ceiling track, moving forward with slow, deliberate assurance. Its segmented arms unfolded one by one, each joint rotating with a quiet mechanical click. The device lowered behind Kael's head, then swung gently overhead, positioning itself mere inches above his brow.

"The Twisted who was in this chair before you? Shows up every year like clockwork. No matter how deep we push the cleanse, the Mark bleeds through in months." She glanced at him sideways as she adjusted the scanner into its final position. "I prefer what's left of your purer grade to the gutter brew they're pumping into each other now."

The monitor beside her chirped once before displaying a jagged pulse pattern that flared, then leveled into a clean, steady rhythm. For a moment, a thin vein of black static rippled through the waveform before it vanished. The system had locked onto the precise frequency of the decay.

Every trace of the breakdown left its own resonance, a microscopic echo that clung to living tissue long after the Thanium had fractured. The machine's photonic lattice beam sought those echoes, burning them away one particle at a time. It was delicate work. Too high a frequency, and the optic nerves would sear. Too low, and the corruption would only burrow deeper and the Mark would remain present.

The doctor leaned in until her voice was just above the hum of the machine. "Before we start, are you sure you don't want to give in? Join one of the Rift cults? Let the dark take control?"

Kael let out a smirk, rolling the thought over. "I'd rather throw myself headfirst into the Flame of the Inner Sanctum"

She let out a sharp laugh. "You've always been my most dramatic client"

Her hand hovered over the main control. The moment of familiarity faded from her face, replaced by practiced calm.

"Alright then," she said, "Let the cleansing commence!"

She pressed the switch.

The machine came alive with a low, rising growl. The sound started low like distant thunder before climbing in pitch and volume. Metal joints along the treatment ring unlocked with heavy precision, one after another, like a sequence being armed. The air warmed, vibrating with a low harmonic hum as energy built in the coils overhead.

"You know the drill," she said, her voice shifting into practiced neutrality. "If it starts to burn too much, say something or you'll be blind before you can blink. The first sweep is at ninety microcells."

She gave him a quick, reassuring glance.

"Hang in there."

Kael nodded once, the last movement he'd be allowed. This was the point where instinct begged the body to move, to brace, to resist. And where the machine demanded stillness.

A circular frame descended from the center of the apparatus, aligning itself with his skull in a series of micro-adjustments. Servos clicked and recalibrated until the positioning was exact.

With a soft, surgical release of pressure, four clamps extended from the inner ring and settled against his temples and the base of his skull. Then the clamps tightened. Not painfully, just undeniably. He was locked in now. No turning away.

Fine filaments of pale light flickered out from each contact point, tracing the contours of his cranial pathways. The light was cool at first, almost gentle, before it narrowed and converged.

A pinpoint beam ignited with a sharp flash, striking directly into his pupils. For an instant, everything was white. Then the beam bloomed outward, unfurling like a petal in motion until it formed a perfect ring of light around each eye. The ring flared and stabilized, tracing the natural curve of his eyes before extending to the outer rims, brushing close to his lids. His vision tunneled upward through it. It was as if the world had been reduced to a corridor of light that climbed forever into the void.

Warmth gathered along the outer rims of his eyes. At first it was only a faint prickle, like the tingling rush that came when blood returned to a limb. Then the light found what it was looking for. The residue of Thanium flared on contact, igniting in thin rings of brilliance that burned clean through the impurities. Each pulse came faster, deeper, until the tingling became a steady, consuming throb.

As the beams carved through the layers of his eyes, peeling away the damage left by years of decay, sweat began to slide down his temples and hissed where it met the clamps. The sear was sharper than he remembered. It felt alive, invasive. Every breath drew in air that felt weighted in his lungs, as if the process itself had heat enough to breathe.

The light crept inward, reducing its radius ring by ring. The tunnel around him constricted, vision folding toward the center until the brightness pressed against the back of his skull. The photonic beams converged as they closed in on the retina, where the breakdown ran deepest.

It burned. Burned good.

Black, acrid smoke curled upward in lazy tendrils, swirling through the stagnant air like it had nowhere else to go.

Then came the smell. No matter how many times he'd done this, it always hit him like a wall. You could only get so used to the smell of your own eyes burning.

Kael's hand found the necklace at his throat. The metal was cold against his skin—too cold, almost shocking after the heat. The familiar shape pressed into his palm, edges worn smooth where years of use had stripped them bare. His fingers tightened around it, the way they always did when the world narrowed to pain and light. Something solid. Something that anchored him when everything else was dissolving into white noise and fire.

His eyes throbbed under the light, but he forced them open. He *had* to.

The last treatment had bought him over a decade, ten years where no one looked twice. Ten years of silence in a world built to hunt him.

The pain was the cost of anonymity. And he was still willing to pay.

The doctor leaned in beside him as she slid a narrow data core into the machine's side. When she spoke, her voice was close and just above the low mechanical whine filling his ears.

"I've got you a solid ID this time," she said. "Thirty-five. Clean record. Recently divorced. Registered citizen from the Turpan Province."

On the adjacent screen, long strings of biometric code scrolled upward. A blank retinal profile was waiting to be burned in.

“Look at you, Kael. That’s a few rungs above your usual crowd. Maybe head back to that bar and spark up a fiery romance. I hear the Flamies hit the place hard. There’s nothing easier than a woman who’s been traumatized. Trust me on this”

Kael forced a thin breath through gritted teeth. His jaw was the only thing he could move.

“That’s dark,” he rasped. “Even for you.”

“I live in a sublevel wiping the stains of immortality out of people’s eyes,” she said, making one last micro-adjustment with clinical precision. “You think I’m aiming for wholesome?”

The machine’s pitch climbed once again, and the light above his eyes shifted with white giving way to a faint, clinical blue. That was the indication that ID synthesis was about to begin.

The Unified Order didn’t trust fingerprints anymore. Voiceprints, gait, even DNA could all be altered or rewritten in a dozen ways. Retinal scans were king.

The eye carried the truth of a life. Its natural biomarkers were unique to each person, mapped and banked across the entire citizen registry.

And beneath that identity lay the real test—traces of Thanium. The key to immortality. No other element had ever matched its effects, and none had ever been found on Earth no matter how hard they searched. The finite supply, hauled in from the stars, had been burned through in the millions of treatments, purges, and wars that followed. Now, what remained was a crude shadow of the original—impure, unstable.

It froze aging, yes, but it also corroded the mind. The creeping rot that occurred afterward led to cellular breakdown, cognitive decay, and, eventually, madness.

In the bloodstream, that decay left microscopic residue. It seeped into the eyes, staining the iris like smoke trapped in glass.

The Order knew. And they used it. One retinal scan, and they could tell not just who you were, but what you had become.

She flicked a series of toggles on the console, fingers moving with practiced speed. “Your eyes will—”

Suddenly, a violent screech tore through the room as the machine cut off mid-cycle. The light vanished in an instant as the room was swallowed in total blackness.

Kael blinked once, then again. The heat behind his eyes still pulsed, fading too slowly. It was the raw sting of unfinished work.

“For Flame’s sake,” the doctor hissed in the dark.

Objects clattered to the floor as she shuffled beside him, hands sweeping across the console until they found a slim, rectangular device. With a flick of her thumb, a translucent pane of light rose from its surface, blooming into a faint holographic display of ghost-blue light that washed over her face in fractured pulses. She leaned in, scanning fast.

“The siphon’s blown,” she muttered, half to herself as she read. “They picked up the draw.”

Her fingers danced across the data screen as she continued talking under her breath. “The pulse regulator should’ve rerouted the surge before it spiked. Damn it, I *knew* I got ripped off on this unit. It was supposed to dynamically respond to secondary pulses, not fry at the first sign of feedback.”

Kael barely heard the rest. He moved on instinct. The clamps around his wrists gave reluctant clicks as he twisted his hands free. His skin burned where the steel had pressed too long, but he didn’t stop.

He braced his palms against the edge of the inner frame and shoved. The machine resisted at first, then lurched sideways. He dragged one arm free, then the other, pushing the device aside just enough to clear his view and breathe.

For a moment, he just listened. His vision swam—blurry, but holding steady. His senses felt dulled, like his body hadn’t quite caught up to the blackout. In the dark, it was hard to tell what was real. The shuffling of other patients, the low mutters in the distance, the drip of condensation from a broken vent—it all blended into the same uneasy rhythm.

The doctor’s voice cut through it. Sharp. Commanding.

“Priority code delta—begin extraction. Strip every unit, burn anything traceable. Move fast.”

Kael braced a hand on the table and started to rise, but the doctor’s hand caught his shoulder before he could stand. Her grip was firm—steady, not restraining.

“Easy,” she said quietly.

Her eyes caught what little light remained, the faint glow of an augmented iris adjusting for darkness. The pupils expanded, glinting with a subtle, greenish-white sheen that painted her expression in cold precision. She leaned closer, studying him.

“The outer sclera’s mostly clean—still a few blotches, but it looks white at a glance,” she murmured. “Your retinas, though... still pretty dark.”

Her irises shifted, a faint glimmer as the augment switched modes. She held his gaze a heartbeat longer, calculating.

“You’ll pass basic scans,” she said, voice dropping as if confirming a checklist. “Anything high-tier will flag you. You’ll have to come back after the ceremony. We’ll finish then.”

“Two days, Doc. That’s a long time to keep my head down in this city.”

“Longer if you get yourself caught.” She was already moving. Cables came free with quick, practiced tugs. Modules snapped shut, disappeared into a hard case. “They’ve been doing this for months,” she muttered, half to him, half to the room. “Sweeping tunnels. Shutting down safehouses. Dragging Cleansers out of the walls. They’re nervous, Kael. Nervous and dangerous.”

“Nervous about what?”

She paused, hand on a latch, listening to something only she could hear—the faint tick of her comm, the building’s breath. Then she looked back at him, eyes pale with night-vision glow.

“Something big enough to make the Order twitch.”

She reached into the drawer beside the console, pulled out a small metallic disc no wider than her palm, and tossed it to him. Kael caught it on reflex. The device was light, cool, its surface etched with a spiral of faint green veins that pulsed once and went dark.

He turned it over once between his fingers, then he slipped it into his coat beside his pistol. The two pressed against each other under the fabric—one for precision, one for final chances. More options never hurt.

The doctor leaned in, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Head to the Rift. Stay off the main routes and don’t stop. The Order hasn’t set foot in there for nearly a decade. Hell, even the Flamies won’t touch it. Make it before dawn, and you’ll disappear.”

A soft pulse blinked along the comm implant at her temple, washing her face in a brief flash of red. She tilted her head, listening. Then her expression hardened.

“Shit,” she muttered. “Term squad inbound.”

Kael was already on his feet, instincts taking over. He pushed through the thick polymer cloth partition that brushed cold against his shoulder as he pulled it aside.

“Same bar,” she called after him. “Three a.m. Order a Black Fade, then a White Horizon. I’ll send another pathrunner.”

He turned back, just enough for the glow of her device to catch his face. The remnants of the photonic burn still glowed faintly in his eyes, yet his instincts had already kicked in. Running, hiding, surviving—it was muscle memory now.

“I’ll fix this,” she said quietly. “You know I’m good for it.”

Kael held her gaze for half a second longer, then nodded once and turned away. The curtain fell closed behind him with a whisper.

The corridor ahead was a hollow vein of shadow. With each step, the shuffle of unseen movement and the distant murmur of other patients faded until there was nothing but the sound of his boots and the slow, steady rhythm of escape.

At the steel door, he ran a hand along the wall, finding the recessed panel. The power was dead. No scan, no signal. Just a thin seam of cold metal under his palm.

He gripped the handle and pulled.

Beyond it, the world had changed. The storm had broken, but the air clung to its memory. Water pooled along the pavement and reflected the golden hue of the rising sun. Everything was wet, still, and on edge.

He stood there for a beat, breathing it in, then he pulled up his hood and stepped out.

The Rift would have to be his refuge now. It wasn't safe but it was familiar. And there, at least, he wouldn't stand out.

Twisted's had long since made that forgotten corner of the city their safe haven. They banded together, not out of trust, but survival. His darkened eyes wouldn't draw as much attention in a sector where black eyes were commonplace. The Syndicate took care of their own—whatever that meant. For now, it was the closest thing to safety he had.