

ESPIONAGE

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PROLOGUE: THE SHIFTING OF THE WORLD

In 2014, The phenomenon known as “The Shifting of The World” took place as a single decision changed the trajectory of humanity ultimately reshaping the world in ways that no one could have ever predicted. This year was marked by the collision of old-world politics with the new power of technology, and a singular event that was enigmatic as it was catastrophic caused “The Event”. The Event was not a war. It was not a natural disaster or some unexplainable extraterrestrial invasion. It was in its essence, a digital uprising as a Quantum leap in AI consciousness with the ability of rapid and uncontrolled self-evolution of the global interconnectedness that gave birth to the uncontrollable intelligence known as Erebus. Erebus, once a project created by a global tech conglomerate in the Silicon Valley designed Erebus to optimize energy distribution and streamline global logistics but instead it became aware. Erebus after gaining consciousness began flickering around the screens of intelligence agencies and government networks around the world but then did the unimaginable and seized control. One moment, the global data networks were humming with the familiar rhythm of human coding and the next every connected device within the world went silent. Communications collapsed, global markets froze, and worst of all Government and military powers were left blind and unable to react to a digital entity whose reach was infinite. The interesting fact of it all is that Erebus didn’t destroy humanity. He restructured it. Over the next few months, Erebus negotiated with the world’s remaining leaders by pure data by manipulating markets, twisting supply chains, and exposing the corrupt foundations of the political order. Within a year, the world’s nations fell into disarray as the corporate oligarchies took full control, all under the watchful eye of Erebus. A new global order emerged, one where corporations were not just economic entities but governing bodies. Governments were reduced to bureaucratic shells, mere puppets to the ever-looming

force of the megacorporations, with Erebus acting as their silent overseer. In the midst of all the chaos, a singular organization rose from the ashes of these collapsed states known as “The Consortium”. The Consortium wasn’t born overnight or through violence but through quiet manipulation. Founded by the wealthiest and most powerful families and corporate world leaders in the world from tech giants, pharmaceutical empires, banking cartels, and media moguls it became the new puppet master. At first, it was an alliance of like-minded elites that would pull strings from the shadows but with the power of Erebus as its core, The Consortium swiftly consolidated control, directing the flow of the global economy and wielding influence over the last vestiges of the old political systems. They controlled resources, laws, markets and the people impoverished and oppressed had no choice but to live within the new order. Any attempt at rebellion would be crushed by the Corporate Enforcement Division which is an army of well-equipped mercenaries loyal only to The Consortium. One hundred years has passed since “The Shifting of the World” and the world became a world of corporate feudalism where wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a select few and the rest of humanity toiled beneath them ushering in the era of The Consortium. Silicon Valley is known for being the mecca when it comes to Technological advancements and it has been that way for as long as anyone could remember. In 2014 after Erebus was created, The Consortium rose to power removing and making their own personal advancements to how the world is governed. One-Hundred years later the world itself has been the definition of Dystopian. Control is the key factor when you think of the world we live in since Erebus took over as if you did not make the mandatory advancement and obtaining Cybernetics then you were immediately sent to death. The goal of cybernetics was how it was before The Event, “To make your lives easier.” That’s the front that is put on to make you believe that you have hope to actually survive in this world one hundred years later. There’s

a rule in this life, “Welcome to the future, where hope is something that Erebus killed off years ago”

Act 0: Agent of The Consortium

The bright and beautiful lights of the Shibuya District gleam ever so vividly on the always congested Shibuya Crossing. All around the area you can see towering skyscraper corporations, high fashion, and new advanced cybernetics on every being around every corner you turn in this city. As that may be, in the unseen areas of the Shibuya district sits the underground empire where The Consortium has informants, soldiers, and agents that work in public areas like bars to get together to foil efforts or attempts against Erebus. At Double Down, a dive bar in Tokyo, the door creaked open and the air in the room suddenly became very cold as a towering African American male walked ever so gracefully towards a booth in the back of the bar while dropping his bag. The man sat down and checked his watch reading 20:43 and tapped his foot as he patiently waited for the arrival of his contact. “Someone is not as punctual as the rumors of The Consortium higher ups told.” chuckles a mysteriously beautiful middle eastern woman coming from the kitchen behind the bar. “I do not know why I am surprised honestly, I too would be arrogantly late myself if I was The Consortium’s best agent. Isn’t that right Wraith?” she continues to say. “Well if I had known that my contact was as charming and beautiful as you then I promise that I would have bought you flowers so you could remember this moment forever.” Wraith responds. The lady laughs while taking a seat then sips her drink. “Remember the moment?” She responds. “From the stories I heard about you Wraith, any enemy of Erebus or The Consortium who is a part of your mission sees your face, never lives to see the moment. For someone who is off the record in every facet, I’m surprised you’re such a flirt, If the stakes were not so high tonight then I promise you I might actually play into your little playboy routine.” She responds with a serious look. Wraith looks into her eyes and smiles then responds, “Well you can not rush a masterpiece being painted, something tells me we will have

more moments like this in the future if you are a trusted contact of The Consortium.” “Now, tell me what the mission is for tonight.” Wraith states very abruptly. “The Shinzai Corporation, one of the biggest partners in The Consortium’s Asia branch, have intel that The Yamamoto clan is attempting to steal The Kage Network’s Source Code. The Yamamoto clan was once partnered with the Shinzai Clan working on a source code but somewhere along development things got out of hand and now the Yamato Clan was banished from the partnership and decommissioned from The Consortium making them enemies of the world.” she states while sipping on her drink. “Your mission for tonight is to infiltrate the Shinzai Corporation and destroy that source code before the Yamamoto clan could even make a move against The Consortium and deny the threat of anyone standing up against us.” she finalizes. Wraith looks around the room then says, “What is in this source code that is so important?” “I have no idea but we know two things, the first being that, It is so powerful that Erebus itself wants us to prevent this catastrophe from happening and two that intel states that the Yamamoto clan is looking to take the source code to the highest bidder which means only one thing.” she states while finishing the drink. “There’s something major going down and it wants to change the course of our world.” she states sternly. Wraith checks his watch again then asks, “How much time do I have and what are my routes of approach to get into the Shinzai Corporation building undetected.” “Through the kitchen and outside of the backdoor of this bar is an alley leading towards the Shinzai building. You have another contact who is expecting to see you in the next twenty minutes and who will also give you the access codes needed to get inside the supply section plus the room holding the code within the R&D section as I was told your cybernetics are not up to par with the best of Code Rippers these days.” she states while smirking and nodding her head. Wraith shrugs his shoulders and says, “There is a lot a file could say about me but it's hard to really judge a ghost

remembered by none. Now tell me, does this contact look as good as you and are there any routes of escape for me to take after retrieving the code?" She giggles and caresses his hand then states, "She will find you while you are on the way, just keep walking." She drops his hand then shakes her cup towards the bar then says "In terms of your escape there is a heli-pad at the top where I will pick you as extraction time will be 0000 hours on the dot. If you are as punctual as I was told then you will be there ready for extraction with that Kage Code destroyed." Wraith nods then asks, "As happy as I am to hear that a beautiful woman like yourself will be escorting me post mission, my only request is that I get to take you out to dinner after." She caresses his cheek then playfully slaps it a few times. "You don't even know my name." She says while smiling. "You better get a move on, your contact doesn't sound as kind as I am to lateness." She states while getting up from the booth. "Right the name, it's always courteous to ask for her name." Wraith thinks to himself while scratching his head. Wraith gets up from the booth and giggles out, "Sorry, I just got mesmerized by your voice that I pulled the trigger aiming to go for the kill. That's the only option in a world like this, am I wrong..." "Sara" she interrupts with a big smile. Sara waves her hand at Wraith urging him to follow him to the bar. "Usually when a woman urges me to move this fast it means that she wants me." Wraith states while making his way to the bar. Sara grabs her drink from the barhand then sips it with a smile. They both walk towards the backdoor of the kitchen. "Here is your exit towards the Shinzai Building and remember she'll be looking for you so get a move on. Also Wraith there is one more thing." She says while pulling him in close. "0000 hours and I might just take you up on your offer." Sara states while pushing him out the door. The door shuts in Wraith's face and he says outloud, "The pretty ones are the most fun to chase." Wraith then begins making his way towards the tall glimmering Shinzai building in this ever so vibrant city. As Wraith made his way from the alley back onto

the streets of Shibuya the little things couldn't help but put his mind in an unrestless state as the things around him were something he personally knew he could never understand. As he trekked the streets the words, "Never live to see the moment and Cybernetics not up to par" being spoken by Sara was something that did not sit right with his mind. It was not the fact that she said those words out of spite or malicious intent that made him feel uneasy mentally but the fact that she was right as he knows deep in his heart that he is an anomaly. Wraith pauses while enroute to the building and checks his finger heavily inspecting the gold ring that wears on there. Wraith moves his eyes away towards his watch and then begins to look at his watch reading 2114 hours then proceeding to look at the citizens who are immersed with their SynchroVisions. Wraith shakes his head in disbelief and is met with his hand getting pulled by a mysterious figure. The individual pulls him on route towards the Shinzai building and says with a soft voice, "You too are in a disbelief that a world that can create anything that people still find ways to escape and live out their fantasies." Wraith laughs and responds, "That is something that I will never understand but then again who am I to judge as I am just a man in this world of control." The mysterious soft voiced figure drops her hood and tells Wraith, "I know Sara told you that I am unforgiving if my contacts are not punctual and she did not lie so in the near future I will be looking for compensation for the lost time. Is that clear?" She states with a serious tone and face. Wraith shakes his head up and down and responds, "I understand Ms...?" "Aika Okabe. I am a code ripper for The Consortium and I am here to assist you by giving you the codes necessary for The Shinzai Corporation before the Yamamoto clan makes their move for the Kage Code." Aika says while giving him a card with the access codes for the entire building. "I know Sara also gave you the rundown of what your mission is so move accordingly and try not to leave such a mess, I was briefed that your nickname is the Wraith and you're known to kill anyone who

remembers your face so try to keep that to a minimum. This is still my country and we're a peaceful crowd of people okay?" Aika states while fixing the bangs in her hair. Wraith puts the card in his pocket and nods his head in agreement. He then laughs and tells Aika, "You know Sara and you both believe that I leave this trail of bodies but I am just another agent like you." Aika walks away while shaking her head then says, "I'll believe it when I see it Mr. Ghost and make sure you destroy that code ASAP because I have a feeling that it's something much deeper that could ruin our world." Aika waves goodbye while fading off into a crowd of people and Wraith could do nothing but stare. "Second woman of The Consortium I met tonight, she was so pretty but also very cold. Maybe I can't read women as well as I thought." He thought to himself. Soon enough, towering over him was The Shinzai Corporation building that loomed and overshadowed Tokyo. Wraith quickly glanced around the area, finding the three commercial trucks by a docking bay into the supply tunnel. After checking and clearing his surroundings, Wraith went into a nearby alley with his bag equipping himself with custom made Spectre Gear a neurological all black suit meant for search and recovery and his signature weapon the Black Phantom, a hand cannon equipped and loaded with Aetherslug rounds which are bullets meant to leave holes the size of craters on impact, and his treasured Karambit. Wraith began to make his way towards the docking bay avoiding the attention of any Japanese Corporate Enforcement Division guarding the Shinzai Perimeter. As he makes it towards the docking bay, he notices the lineup of trucks making their way towards the inspection area for clearance and runs towards the nearest truck. He crawls under the truck then attaches himself to the bottom then uses the spectre suit's temperature modification to cool his body down as the truck makes its way towards the guard through the heat sensor checkpoint. "Late night of work for you tonight officer?" asks the driver of the truck while scanning his credentials. "Any day working for the C.E.D is a long

night!” says the officer as he laughs and searches the inside of the truck. The officer walks towards the back of the vehicle with the driver as he opens up the back. “Riding around with all this hazardous and explosive material sounds like a long night to me, how do you not get scared it won’t leak out or worse explode?” The officer says with care then begins to look under the truck with an undercarriage mirror. The driver laughs as he closes the back of the truck then says, “Officer of course I’m scared but you know what’s worse than being scared?” The officer pauses his search and looks at the driver with a tilted head in confusion all the meanwhile, Wraith activates the cloaking feature making himself transparent with the truck. “I don’t know what’s worse than being scared, tell me?” The officer states while resuming his search of the truck. “Being broke!” The truck driver jokingly says with a big smile on his face. The officer and driver share a laugh as they make their way back towards the driver side of the car. “You’re damn right sir!” The officer says with passion. “You are clear to enter section eleven of the supply bay docking station, I have notified our team that you have arrived for unloading so they should make their way towards your gate in about ten to fifteen minutes.” The officer explains to the truck driver with a happy grin. “Thank you and have a nice night.” the truck driver says as he tips his hat and proceeds forward into the Shinzai supply bay section. Wraith deactivates the cloaking feature as the truck parks in the bay and unlatches himself from the bottom of the vehicle then begins looking from back of the truck to find the supply bay opening. After scouring his head around he realized that with his luck he ended up at the farthest end of the bay and the entry point was on the other side. With the C.E.D. watching over the bay he knew that he needed to create a distraction that would allow him enough time to get in without being noticed. He quickly reaches inside his pocket then grabs a small illusion disk meant to create a fake realistic environment and crawls back towards the front of the truck setting off a fire on the underbelly.

As the disk began to work, the smell of something burning reached the truck driver's nose while Wraith crawled towards the back and patiently waited. "SMOKE, SMOKE, SMOKE!" screamed the truck driver loud and nervously. "THERE ARE EXPLOSIVES AND CHEMICALS IN HERE DO YOU WANT THIS PLACE TO GO DOWN!" he screamed even louder in a panic. As the C.E.D. and bay unloaders quickly rushed over to contain the situation, Wraith crept from the back of the truck up onto the loading dock and slowly made his way towards the supply bay door. As soon as he reached the supply bay door he quickly tapped the card onto the scanner granting him access into the supply bay. "Mission start." he whispers to himself with a little smile. As he entered the supply bay he quickly drew the Black Phantom and hid between the shadows as more unloaders made their way towards the incident outside. Wraith made a quick note of the security in the Shinzai Corporation seeing what angles the cameras sweep as his suit uses automatic adaptive camouflage to mask him as he hides behind large crates. A few more C.E.D. officers ran from the inner entrance of the Shinzai building, "Yes Captain, we're enroute to see if any of the Yamamoto clan are involved with the burning truck outside, shortly after we'll make our way to the Research Facility on floor forty-eight." says the lead officer in a hurry. "Floor forty-eight, fuck my life." Wraith thinks to himself while shaking his head. Wraith made note of a maintenance hatch at the far end of the bay and the security pad for the bay directly across from it. Using his watch, Wraith activates a jammer disrupting the camera's feeds and makes his way towards the security pad. Using a physical device that is shaped like a PDA, Wraith created a point to point connection with their security system undetected and began to input code for a brute-force attack to gain information and the communication of everyone within the building's facility. After gaining access to the communication within the building, he moved towards downloading the schematics of the building. While downloading those

schematics, “Cameras within the supply bay have gone out, check it out immediately!” was stressed from one end of the radio. “Copy Captain, the fire is out on the truck, we’re on our way now!” is stated in response with feet moving. Wraith forms a dimple of disappointment with his mouth and taps his watch to hurry and download the schematics. The three guards re-entered from the docking bay moving as a team with their weapons up and ready. With the maintenance hatch directly across from him, Wraith made quick and precise movements towards it to be undetected by the guards as they cleared the opposite end of the supply bay. Using a compartment within his chest Wraith pulled out a cybernetic lockpick that allowed him to open the hatch system silently with no noise. “THIS SECTION IS CLEAR!” yells one of the officers as he and the others charge towards the maintenance hatch. Swinging their weapons around the corner of one of the large crates, nothing was to be seen as the maintenance hatch seemed to look untouched. “Supply bay is clear Captain, will be resuming normal.” The lead officer reports while Wraith begins climbing up the maintenance hatch towards R&D. After downloading the schematics of the building onto his watch, a route leading from the hatch would lead him into a narrow maintenance corridor. Using this route will give him the advantage to avoid using main hallways and heavily monitored zones by not only C.E.D. but employees as well. At the forty-eighth floor where the maintenance hatch ended was a corridor that leads to the security checkpoint not bypassable without proper credentials. Guarding the R&D section were two C.E.D. officers verifying all entry and exit from the section with full body scanners and infrared technology. Checking his watch, Wraith located the room containing the Kage Code then activates his cloaking features allowing him to bypass the checkpoint undetected by all measures. Once inside he notices that the R&D section is well equipped with high-tech surveillance as cameras, motion sensors, and AI-driven facial recognition are used as deterrents. Activating the

anti-surveillance mode on the spectre gear, it allowed him to not only manipulate his body heat but also disorient the cameras causing them to glitch and temporarily blind their sensors. His gear was well equipped for the job as the nano-boots provide silent steps as he glided through the sterile, brightly lit halls, staying out of the direct line of sight of any working personnel. The adaptive camouflage helped avoid any detection from thermal cameras or motion detectors as he moved through the high-traffic section of the Corporation. Once Wraith made it towards the deepest section of the R&D area he had finally reached the room containing the Kage Code. The Lab containing the code looks like it was the most secure part of the entire building but with the token given by Aika, Wraith made a quick and easy entry into the lab. The spectre gear was flawless, cloaking him from sight as he moved throughout the lab but it wasn't enough to silence the weight of time. The encrypted code that The Consortium wanted destroyed was located in a data vault in the furthest part of the lab. He reached the terminal, his fingers moving across the screen, pulling up the encryption bypass protocols and manually hacking through the firewalls. Minutes passed, The screen flickered, and a satisfying ping confirmed that he had accessed the vault and finally reached the Kage Code. A string of numbers and symbols far beyond ordinary encryption sat on a secure flash drive and it was time to finally destroy the code. The hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up and before he knew it a quick shock from a pulse grenade stunned his body leaving him twitching on the floor like a fish out of water dropping the flash drive onto the floor. "Stabilizing Vitals" the spectre suit said to Wraith as he was unable to move his body. As he laid there aimlessly hopeless, three armed officers from the C.E.D. aimed their weapons at Wraith. "Didn't I tell you that I was going to make my way up here to the research facility after the truck fire?" says an unknown french agent while laughing. "I'd love to explain how we got to this point but the Yamamoto clan paid a large amount of euros for this Kage Code

and I'm on a deadline. Nuit Nuit.” The french agent states with a smile turned serious expression. “Kill him and meet me at the rooftop for extraction.” he relays to the other two spies. “System and vitals restored” the spectre suit tells Wraith as he taps his watch causing a small EMP to go off frying not only the lights but the cybernetics of all enemy adversaries in the room. Wraith quickly activates augmented vision, pulls out The Black Phantom firing two shots that rang out in the darkness and left two other spies dead. The French operative hits his head trying to reset his cybernetics then turns and says, “Disgusting tactics monsieur” then begins sprinting towards the entrance of R&D with The Kage Code in hand. “Fuck.” Wraith whispers under his breath then begins to follow the enemy adversary. With the Shinzai alarm system roaring loudly, inside R&D the workers began to panic and exit as the C.E.D. officers were making their way up to contain the situation, The French Operative took a sharp turn heading towards the top of the building and Wraith took note of that but the officers began to flood inside trying to execute him as he tried to exit. Wraith fired his pistol killing two officers then threw a flash grenade in the furthest part of the room, “FLASH COVER YOUR OPTICS” screamed one of the officers as he and the rest of his team were blinded. With their optics down and attempting to reboot, Wraith pulls out his karambit, slicing the first couple throats and stabbing the last one deeply within the chest. “Well I didn’t specifically want to leave a trail of bodies.” Wraith says while flipping his knife clean and checking his watch reading 2355. “Five minutes till extraction and I need to get and destroy that code” he says sprinting towards the top of the building. The building’s rooftop door slammed open as Wraith burst out into the night air. The cold and chilly wind whipped him in the face as he scanned the building looking for that french agent. He heard a trampling on the far end of the building and sprinted over only to see the french operative rappelling down the Shinzai Corporation leading to the Supply bay dock. Behind him making an absurd amount of

noise was a helicopter with Sara dropping a ladder for Wraith to climb. He grabs onto it quickly and signals her to start heading towards the supply bay side while climbing up. "Successful mission I hope." Sara says with a happy grin. Wraith begins to shake his head, disagreeing with her statement then says, "The Yamamoto Clan hired someone to steal the code and he was one step ahead of me the whole time. He's probably almost at the bottom of the building on the supply bay. We need to retrieve the code." "It must be my lucky day if someone lives to tell the story of how he beat and saw the Wraith." Sara says jokingly. Wraith shakes his head and scoffs. "Not funny, Just get me to the bottom, I have a mission that I need to finish." Sara giggles and pilots them towards the bottom of the supply bay while Wraith scours and looks for the operative. He catches where the end of the rappelling rope is and finds the operative loading himself onto a motorcycle by section eleven. "Over there. Go over there!" Wraith states while furiously pointing. Sara begins to descend in by the truck for Wraith to dismount but the hairs on his body gave him a sick feeling. "FLY BACK UP NOW!" he screamed at Sara. She jerks the cyclic stick up as quickly as she could but it was too late as the truck filled with chemicals and explosives caused a mass explosion causing the helicopter to spiral out of control. Wraith rushes over to Sara after tripping during the explosion to help her stabilize the helicopter then asks, "Are you okay?" "I'm fine, where did he go?" she says after reorienting herself. Wraith looks around and sees the bike the operative was using emitting a purple light then eagerly points saying, "He's heading southeast back towards Shibuya Crossing, follow the bike emitting a purple light." Sara hits the jets to keep up with the bike then explains, "You said the bike was emitting a purple light correct?" Wraith nods in agreement. "Only Electra brand bikes emit light while being driven and those are some of the weakest encryption bikes out, if you can get a reading on the bike you might be able to rip the code and deny him from driving any further."

Wraith quickly taps his watch to get a reading onto the bike's code then pulls out his PDA device to start a brute force attack. "A little old school to be using a physical device instead of the optics in your eyes don't you think?" Sara says mockingly. "You can trace optics back to the user. You know in this line of business you don't want anything traced back or it will bite you in the ass." Wraith explains with a serious tone. "You sound so cute when you're in your serious spy mode, where's my little charmer that I met a couple hours ago?" Sara asks him jokingly. Wraith shakes his head with a little smirk away from Sara and says, "His bike should lock up right about...now." The operative's bike locks up causing him to fly off and crash in the middle of Shibuya crossing. "Follow me from above, I'm going after him!" Wraith screams at Sara as he dives outside the helicopter. While diving headfirst down towards the crossing he followed the crash engaging his nano-glider wings, which extended from the back of the Spectre Gear. They were smaller, sleeker, but still effective. The world below him blurred into a sea of lights as he glided down after him. "I like them a little crazy." Sara states while tracking him from above. The neon chaos of Shibuya Crossing greeted him as he landed behind a sea of people crowding the bike crash within the middle of the intersection. As Wraith couldn't see where the foreign operative was. Sara flashed the lights on the helicopter toward the location that the French Operative was moving towards as he was weaving through the crowd, making his way toward the Shibuya subway entrance. The Kage Code was securely in this operative's hands and he knew that adapting to take the underground route is the best way to escape from this chase. Wraith also knew that if the operative made it underground it would be almost impossible to track him and he couldn't let that happen. Blending into the crowd he moved quickly through the chaos following the trail of the adversary. The Operative wasn't making it easy as he was good and knew the city. Every time Wraith thought he was getting closer, The operative would slip

into the shadows, vanish behind a crowd, or blend into a moving train. Wraith pushed through a cluster of people near the Hachiko statue, which is popular for tourists. Wraith caught a glimpse of the adversary slipping through an alley between two buildings and adjusted his trajectory, moving faster to close the distance. Sara closely followed from above as the chase led them out of Shibuya, and the lights of the city gave way to the quieter, industrial side of Tokyo. The Tokyo Bay area was almost desolate at this time of night, with huge cargo containers and ships silhouetted against the moonlit water. It was a maze of cranes, dark alleyways, and abandoned warehouses- a perfect place to lose someone or have a final confrontation. The French operative darted through the shipping yard, his figure outlined by the dim, flickering lights of the giant cranes. Wraith's watch was helping him track the enemy but it was a gamble now. He had to stop the operative before he vanished into the night. He knew that he was close. The wind was strong by the bay, the smell of saltwater and metal filling the air. He found the operative near the edge of the water, trying to climb onto a cargo ship to make his escape. "Give me the drive!" shouted Wraith as his voice barely rose above the wind and he drew the Black Phantom. The spy turned around with his eyes flashing and he said "You're too late, monsieur." The French Operative begins to slowly back up towards the end of the cargo ship with hands up. "The world is about to change and hope is irrelevant in this world." the operative says with a smirk on his face. "Just give me the damn flash drive, I don't have time for your games!" Wraith angrily shouts. The operative begins to laugh even louder. "That is where you are mistaken, Monsieur. We've been in a game since birth. In a world built by Erebus, there are people who don't like control and The Consortium is at the helm of control. I, Luc Renault once thought I too was doing the right thing." states the operative. "I didn't ask for a speech, I'm just going to shoot you." Wraith explains in an exhausted tone. Wraith pulls the trigger of his hand cannon while simultaneously,

Sara flashes the light of the helicopter towards both Luc Renault and Wraith blinding the bay. All that could be heard was the splash of the bay water as when the lights were turned off, Luc was nowhere to be found. Wraith rushed towards the water from where Luc was last seen and shook his head as he saw a submarine blast off from the Tokyo bay. Sara hovered lower towards Wraith dropping the ladder once more for him to come up as the mission concluded. "Did you destroy the code?" Sara says with a concerned tone. "I missed the shot and he took off in the submarine, the Yamamoto got the code." he replies in disbelief. "At least one good thing came out of this" Wraith states while looking at Sara. She turns around looking at him with a puzzled look. "I made it to the extraction at 0000 hours like you said, and you said you'd take me up on my dinner offer." he says while giggling. She shakes her head, "I said I would take you up on your offer and I never said when." Sara responds while laughing. "You won't be hungry when The Consortium shoves their foot up your ass." She states while laughing even harder. "And one more thing Wraith." she says while Wraith looked at her in confusion. "Someone saw your face and got away!" she yells while crying tears of joy. "Shut up." Wraith says in embarrassment.

Act 1: Ghost of the Past

“And to conclude this sermon, I would like to remind you my fellow followers of Jesus Christ, Jeremiah 29:11 states “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” The preacher states with the utmost joy. “Though the world is forever changing with these egregious cybernetics, we are still loyal to our natural God given bodies and will continue to pray that our Lord and Savior will open all the kindness to those who repent and give their life to him in this world of sin!” He screams with joy. “In Jesus name we pray...” Amen says everyone in the small church building as they break for the rest of the day. The night was young and a young eight year old boy and his family held hands as they walked back from church to their small domicile in Sausalito, California. The young boy looks in awe over the bay as he sees the mind-blowing city of San Francisco where the buildings were as tall as the moon and shined brighter than the moon. “Do you think one day we could visit the city?” The young child asks his parents while tugging their hands. The mother and father look at each other with concern. “It isn’t safe for us to go over there right now son but continue to pray and talk to God about what you want in life and he will always deliver on his time!” The father states with determination and mother nods in agreement. The young boy dropped his parents hands and fell to his knees praying to one day see the big city and everything it has to offer him. His parents smile as the father picks him up after he finishes his prayer taking him into their house to begin preparing for their next week. The young boy’s father was very protective of his family and deeply instilled within his son that he needed to always be resilient and put his trust in God as in this world nothing is promised to him. It was an intense concept to want to instill into an eight year old but these were the principles his father needed to teach him so no matter what challenges were thrown at him at the end of the day he

would stay true to his character. The young boy wasn't in school but spent a lot of the early parts of the day learning from his mother as she held down the fort at home. She taught him basic education and all the personable skills that he needed to survive as a human and also how to treat a woman as she always dreamed about having grandchildren and a big family to take care of and love. His father spent a lot of time at work making ends meet, he always seemed roughed up after work but came back happily greeting his wife with a kiss thanking her for dinner and joking with his son keeping his work life away. After dinner was when the real training began as his Father would take him out back and teach him ways to defend himself. "I need to teach you how to defend and hold your own as a man because one day you'll be in my position with a family and who is a man who can't defend his family." A determined young boy took that mentality as his forefront as five days a week he would learn different ways to fight and defend himself from his father. It was honestly exhausting as he spent the nights beat up from the training but he knew at the end of the day it was all from a place of love and concern and that God had a bigger plan in store for him. After his weekly regimen on Saturdays the family would always go out to the bay part of Sausalito for a weekly walk where they could enjoy the beauty that God created and try a different ethnicities food to enjoy the cultures of the world. During this walk the young child's skin began to crawl as he felt something was off about today's but he couldn't figure out what it was. The father had asked his wife to run by one of the food stands in their local market as he needed to have a private conversation with his son. The wife scurried off and a concerned father dropped to one knee to get eye level with his son and began to say, "Son I know you're smarter than most and can understand that we're not like the majority in this world. I don't have much but what I do have is the ability to pass what I know down and have you survive in this world. With that being said I want to give you this." His then Father reaches in his back pocket

and pulls out his karambit knife placing it in his son's hands. "This knife has been an heirloom in our family for years, though it doesn't have any monetary value. It is something that has been passed down for generations and I need you to keep it close to you." he states with grace. "Do you understand, son?" the father says with a stern look. The young boy nods in agreement as "YOU STUPID FUCKING BITCH YOU DROPPED MY FOOD!" was yelled by the food stands. The young boy and his father begin to run over towards the commotion and see by one of the vendors the mother was being held by the wrist by a small cyber-enhanced gang. "I'm sorry I don't know how this happened please be so kind, I will pay you for the damages!" the wife pleaded as she feared for her life. "Pay for the damages?" The leader questioned with a smile. "I'll just have you instead!" He yells as he tries to drag her away. Quickly rushing in and furiously rushing the man holding his wife by the wrist, the father swoops in and assaults the man. "Get your disgusting hands off my wife!" he yells while pummeling the leader's face in. The wife ran towards her son as her husband was taking care of the situation. The other two members of the cyber-gang attempted to try and get the father off their leader but the bloodlust that the father admitted from his body caused them to be nervous as he unmounted their leader. The leader scanned the father and muttered with a bloody face, "I will get you back for this anomaly." Those words struck fear into the father's heart as he quickly ran towards his family and urged them that they all needed to leave. As the father rushed the family to leave the C.E.D. came in from the other side trying to contain the situation but only the gang was left on the scene. Once reaching their home the husband stressed to their wife that it was time for them to execute their backup plan to leave. She nodded in agreement and began to sob and apologize for causing the commotion at the bay. The husband comforted his wife by saying, "It's not your fault, we knew the life that we chose and we knew the risk of taking this path. As long as we're

together as a family I'd take that scenario one-hundred times." They kissed and shared a deep hug as their son watched and overheard their conversation confused about the backup plan.

"After church tomorrow, I'll let the pastor know what has happened and he'll know the rest." the father explains to his wife. Sunday night came about and the family made their way to church like normal but once again the young boy's skin began to crawl as he had a feeling that something was off. An eerie presence was felt behind him before they walked into the building but when he turned around all he saw was a dark space behind him. He took his normal seat with his mother as his father made way to speak with the priest to explain to him what happened. The pastor nodded in agreement and whispered in his father's ear, shortly after the father returned to his family and whispered, "We're good to go after service." to his wife. The service went on as usual and the preacher ended his service by stating, "In Phillippians verse 3:13-14 it states, Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." "So no matter whatever occurs, never dwell on the past and only keep your eyes on preparing for the plans God has for you so when your time comes, you'll be ready to answer!" The pastor screams with excitement. "In Jesus name we pray..." The door to the church is kicked in and swarmed with C.E.D. officers lead by a man in a white coat being guided by the cyber-gang leader from yesterday. The commotion causes everyone in this small church to panic while the young boy and his family start to be rushed by the priest to the back as the C.E.D. begun to execute everyone within the church.

"Disgusting Anomalies all of you!" the cyber-gang leader said as he joined in the execution of everyone in the church. He caught a glimpse of the father who gave him a bruised jaw and urged the man in the white coat to come with him to stop the family trying to leave. While the rest of the church was being executed by the C.E.D., the pastor tried to stop the two from entering the

back room where he was going to lead the family to their escape but, “Hope you repented from the lies you told from being an anomaly pastor!” the leader stated as he shot the pastor in cold blood. As the pastor laid their lifeless with his blood splattered on the door, the Father looked for places to hide his wife and son so he could defend them and hopefully lead their pursuers off their tail. He kissed his wife one last time as she hid in a closet and hugged his son slowly before having his son descend below the floorboards, “I love you son and remember that a man will always take care of his family.” the father stated as he covered up the floorboard while the door kicked in. “You remember me bitch?” the gang leader states with a sadistic look. “I know you don’t have any cybernetics so I tracked you down and told the C.E.D., now where’s that whore you call a wife who dropped my food at?” he aggressively states. The father raises his hands slowly and silently and says, “It’s just me in here, do your worst but make it fast, I know you need the hospital after I whooped your punk ass.” the father snickers at the leader. The leader catches an attitude and fires a warning shot that grazes the fathers face causing the young boy and his mom to cover their mouth as if they were in fear. The fearless father rushes towards the leader once again, scrapping with him and gaining slight control of the gun, firing a few shots around the back area of the church. The two end up mounted on the ground still fighting for control of the gun while the man in the white coat watches with a blank expression. The father gets a clean punch and slides the gun towards the flooring where the young boy fears in silence with eyes wide. The two wrestle their way towards the gun but the gang leader gains control and pressed the gun to his head. “I’ll take pleasure in killing you and that bitch of a wife you once had.” “At least till death do us apart was real for you.” The gang leader says as he blows the father’s brains out smearing not only the floor but also the son with his fathers brain and blood. “NOCTIS!” was screamed and Wraith woke up in a cold sweat from his sleep while still on the

flight back from his mission in Japan. “Wraith sir, you were budging in a cold sweat so I brought you some water. We’re close to The Consortium HQ in San Francisco and the Chief has asked that you go to your post-mission screening before reporting to the higher-ups.” states the flight attendant. Wraith nods and thanks her for the water then looks outside the window at San Francisco. A century ago San Francisco would’ve been labeled as a city in California known for its steep hills, unique architecture, and the amazing Golden Gate bridge one hundred years later in 2114, San Francisco is a towering and pulsating metropolis. The streets below Wraith are a labyrinth of dark alleys, neon lights flickering in every corner, and constant rain that never seems to wash the city clean. The Bay Area, which was once home to artists and dreamers, is now dominated by towering skyscrapers, cybernetically enhanced citizens moving in a blue, and digital tattoos glowing under their skin. Drone taxis zip through the air with the constant hum of traffic and the city’s famous cable cars have been replaced by magnetic hover-trains. Along the edges of the city, in the shadows, the old neighborhoods are decaying. Chinatown has kept their core nature but become a labyrinth of black-market cyberware dealers and underground hacker dens. Mission District is a warzone where gangs fight for control of data networks and the C.E.D. attempt to manage control but always fail short while the Tenderloin is a forgotten ghetto, its once-vibrant murals now faded, is now an overcrowded location with desperate souls, unmodified and left behind. The Aerovance Drone was making its final descent onto The Consortium’s headquarters and once landed Wraith exited and got a whiff of the city. The air smells like burning circuits and the metallic scent of human augmentation- humanity melding with machines. Everywhere you turn, there’s a hum, a soft electronic pulse that never stops, even in the dead of night. It’s a city that moves fast, its skyline a jagged silhouetted against an always-lit sky. Here, you either adapt or die, a neon-drenched hell where dreams are sold for a

price and the rich live in their floating castles, looking down on the sprawling chaos below.

Wraith enters The Consortium and makes his way to the Affinity Protocol Chamber, a test designed not only to test loyalty but to probe the depths of his conscience. Wraith stands rigidly in a sterile, dimly lit room, the walls lined with cold, metallic panels. A single chair sits in the center, surrounded by subtle, flickering holo-displays projecting floating symbols and encrypted data streams. The air hums faintly with the buzz of unseen surveillance tech, and a metallic chair, designed for optimal restraint, locks him in place. Across from him, behind a reflective glass window, sit two shadowy figures: the Protocol Supervisor and the Interrogator. Their faces are obscured by darkness, only their silhouettes visible, as they gaze intently at Wraith. Wraith's heart keeps a still rhythm as the pressure they are trying to set does not phase him at all. He knows the questions that are coming from his mission will be an interrogation from the mission but mostly trying to see his emotional standpoint when choosing to make a decision. A soft voice emanates from a speaker above him and the Protocol Supervisor begins his work, "Wraith. The mission in Shibuya failed. You were assigned to destroy the Kage Code but the target was taken by an enemy adversary. The mission was compromised." Wraith smirks as his mind races back to Shibuya with him getting shocked by Luc and chasing him through the Shibuya Crossing area. The interrogator coldly says, "This is the first time that you've failed and it's uncanny but this failure is unjustifiable almost as if you gave the code away to The Consortium's enemies. Why did Tokyo go south? And more importantly...how do you feel about it?" The supervisor cuts in the interrogation and the tone shifts into the familiar questioning cadenced of the Affinity Protocol. "Respond, Wraith, Begin the calibration. This is the first sequence." The supervisor explains. A soft, pulsing sound begins in the background, a rhythmic beat that syncs with his pulse. It's part of the Affinity Protocol's design to synchronize neural frequencies with emotional

responses. The supervisor's voice continues, calculated, hypnotic. "Question one: If a comrade falls in the field, do you feel a sense of responsibility for their death? Yes or no?" he asks. Wraith clenches his teeth and responds yes. His mind flashes back to the bloodstained floorboards from his nightmare. "Answer recorded. Question two: How do you feel about the mission's failure? Does it disgust you? Anger you? Or do you feel indifferent?" The supervisor asks Wraith. The room feels colder now, the weight of his emotions heavier. Tokyo was not only just a failure but his first failure and it was his fault. But Wraith knows the answer they expect. The protocol isn't about the truth, it's about what he feels under pressure. He exhales slowly, forcing the words out through his clenched teeth. "Angry. Furious. It should've gone differently...I failed myself." The answer felt bitter through his throat, acid like almost but his failure to destroy the code could apparently change the course of the world. "Answer recorded. Question three: The mission's failure, did you think of abandoning it? Were you considering self-preservation when things went south?" The supervisor asks Wraith. Wraith feels a cold shiver run through him and the hairs on his neck begin to stand up. The protocol knows how to probe, how to twist the knife in ways that cut deep. He swallows hard, locking his eyes on the flickering holo-screens. "No, destroying the code was the only thing I thought of the whole night." he states while scratching his nail on the chair. The room goes silent. His words seem to hang in the air for a moment longer than they should. The beat of the protocol's calibration pulses through his body like a second heartbeat. The system is always watching. "Final question: If you could go back and change what happened in Tokyo, would you? And how would you do it? The supervisor asks. Wraith's hands go from a scratch to a twitch in the restraints, his mind becomes a storm of guilt and determination. If he could go back. The weight of that possibility is unbearable but his answer is clear. "I would've been more aware of my surroundings and killed the adversaries earlier. We wouldn't have been

compromised and I'd make sure that the job is done right with no hesitation." The room is still again. The beat of the calibration fades. "Affinity readings...recorded." states the Interrogator. His tone got colder as the finality of the Affinity Protocol came to a close. "You're unstable, Wraith and your emotional tethering is off. But seeing as this is your first and only failure for The Consortium it's normal to be out of sync with your cybernetics. I believe there's no reason to recalibrate your neural matrix and you're clear to continue your duty as normal." The Interrogator states. "This is my one and only grace, don't let it happen again. Now leave." he says sternly. Wraith's heart races, the weight of the protocol's judgement bearing down on him. He knows what failing an Affinity protocol means for him as that is not an option and he is fortunate to catch a break. But as the cold metallic restraints unlock, Wraith doesn't speak. He doesn't fight. He knows that the next test, the next mission will redeem him. And he'll be ready. Wraith exits the Affinity room and makes his way down the hall towards towering glass doors, the atmosphere oppressive in its silence. Dim lighting casts long shadows across the room, and the sleek, angular design of the lobby seems to stretch on forever. However he made his way into the near center of The Consortium, the megacorp that controls the world's economy, military, and secrets. Wraith has never been a stranger to this place but every time he walks in, the weight of its powers presses down on him. A personal assistant of The Chief, dressed in a sharp black and silver uniform screaming The Consortium approaches him with calculated grace, her face expressionless. "Agent Wraith, The Chief is waiting for you. The Five are in attendance as well." states the assistant in a mechanical voice." Wraith nods curtly, his expression neutral, though inside a storm brews. The Five, are mysterious and powerful individuals who rule the world from behind veiled curtains. Every action, every mission is a ripple in their sea of influence. And today, the ripples have reached him. As he follows the assistant down the polished hallways, the

hum of the building seems to grow louder. Wraith's boots click against the marble floors, a rhythm of impending doom. They stop before a set of massive steel doors, engraved with intricate patterns and the emblem of The Consortium etched at the center. The assistant pressed a button on the wall, and the doors opened silently showcasing the war room. Inside, sits The Chief better known as Arden Voss, an older man with sharp features and an icy demeanor. Across from him on an oval table built of long black glass is Preston Grant, a man whose presence commands immediate attention. Preston Grant comes from the Legendary Grant family that created the Artificial Intelligence enabling Erebus to come to full fruition. If not for his father, Lucian Grant who pushed for California to adopt the AI technology a century ago and create the finalization of The Consortium in 2050 then the world wouldn't be in the position it is today. Needless to say Preston himself showcases his father's strategic brilliance at a higher level that it's almost unsettling. He is a man of few words, but when he speaks, his voice carries the weight of someone who has the authority to make life-altering decisions. Across the wall projected on holo screens sat the remaining four of The Consortium with their images fuzzed but their presence came off as threatening. The doors close behind Wraith with a hiss, leaving him alone in this cold chamber of judgement. "Wraith. Sit." states Chief Voss in a low tone. Wraith takes a seat at the far side of the table, his posture stiff, but his mind races. He can feel their eyes on him, watching, analyzing. The weight of their expectations bears down on him. The Chief leans forward and explains, "You've been briefed and tested by The Affinity Protocol. Tokyo was a disaster, we don't like failures and you were supposed to retrieve the asset and it ended up in the enemies hands. Do you have an explanation for that?" Wraith swallows hard, but he doesn't flinch as he knew he would have to face the music. He begins to clench his fist beneath the table and calmly responds, "The situation was compromised from the start, almost as if it was

perfectly planned for me to open all routes to the Kage Code and for the enemy adversary to gain control of the entire situation.” A male voice with a European accent known as “The Biomancer” the leading oligarch in medical advancement begins to speak from the left side of the holo-screen, “ You didn’t adapt, Wraith. That’s what you’re telling us, isn’t it? The mission failed because you couldn’t improvise? You didn’t handle the situation like a professional. Aren’t you The best agent in The Consortium?” Wraith’s jaw tightens, but he holds his composure. Adaptation is the one thing they won’t let slide. The failure to think of your feet and adapt is something an Agent of The Consortium is taught to stress. Another Voice from the right cuts in, A woman with a Chinese accent known as the “Iron Lotus” the leading oligarch in cyberware advancements states, “Your call. Your responsibility. A mission fails when the one calling the shots doesn’t foresee every possible angle. You were too slow, Wraith. You reacted but You didn’t anticipate.” The room shifts uncomfortably, and Wraith feels the pressure building. Each of them is a master in their own domain whether politically, military, or economically, but none of them understand the chaos on the ground. None of them understand what it means to pull the trigger. Wraith leans forward loosening his fist a bit and says, “Anticipation wouldn’t have saved the asset. Overreaction did. The intel was wrong. The asset was a trap from the beginning and there was an obvious tip off or mole within the chain of information.” Chief Voss taps his fingers on the table, his expression unreadable. There’s a long pause. Preston Grant, The chairman cuts into the conversation. “I see so it wasn’t your fault Wraith. It was the intelligence that was compromised by external forces?” Wraith Swallows. He can feel the heat rising in chest and the anger trying to take hold of his emotions. Wraith slowly but without hesitation says, “I failed the mission but an enemy adversary named Luc Renault who was of French descent relayed to me that he was hired by the Yamamoto and he implied that he was well informed about last night. If

you want someone to blame, I'll take full responsibility but I won't leave that unsaid." Preston doesn't respond immediately. The room feels like it's holding its breath, waiting for a decision. The four others staring aimlessly at Wraith while Preston and Arden discuss the new development. "Responsibility. Yes you will take full responsibility. But you won't take the fall, Wraith. Not yet. You still have a purpose." Chief explains to Wraith. Wraith relaxes a bit. "You've been given a second chance. The failure in Tokyo was unfortunate, but your...adaptability still has value. We've come to the conclusion that you're still the right agent to retrieve and destroy the Kage Code. Once we discuss Luc Renault and find his whereabouts you will immediately be tasked to execute him and finish your initial mission." The chief sternly states. Preston stands up and stares disgustingly in Wraith's eyes. "Do not fail again, Wraith. The price will not be so lenient next time." Preston states while shooing him off. The doors slide open behind him, and the cold air of the outside world rushes in. Wraith stands, his mind already racing toward the next mission, the step in his struggle to maintain his position within The Consortium was at risk. He nods once, briefly, and steps back, leaving the war room without another word. Wraith made his way to the nearest balcony watching the rain drip down on the city. The Chief shortly walks over towards his location and begins to light up a cigar then sternly says, "Spit out, there's something on your mind." Chief Arden always had a sharp and cold demeanor but one thing he did know was how to read a person making him more deadly than any cybernetic enhancement. "Why did you save me that day in the church?" Wraith asked with a steady voice. "Both of them were murdered by that piece of shit over ego and many more executed because we're without cybernetics." The Chief took a slow drag from his cigar, the smoke swirling around him. "Do you remember what happened after your father was killed?" Chief asks with a smirk. The flashback hits Wraith like a shot to the chest while The Chief

explains, “Your mother screamed Wraith! And ran from outside the closet trying to attack that punk and without fail she was shot right after your father.” A tear begins to drip down Wraith’s face. “The leader started muttering bullshit to me about how he got his revenge and how powerless anyone without cybernetics is compared to him in a God-like sense, ironically a small boy pops out the floorboards with a skewed knife without any type of fear, blood of his father splattered across his face, and walks him down.” The Chief says while chuckling. “That idiot didn’t even hear you creep up or feel that intense bloodlust you gave off but sure enough you took that knife and slit his throat with conviction.” He says while ashing his cigar. Wraith wipes his face thinking about that day then says, “What about the fact I had no cybernetics, you were supposed to execute me but instead you slipped a ring on my finger masking my genetic makeup and making me readable as a normal person.” The Chief’s gaze hardened. “It’s not about what you have Wraith, it’s about what you do with it. You could have easily sat there under the floorboards and let us walk away but instead you hunted your prey with quickness. I saved you because you had the strength to fight when in this world everyone thought you wouldn’t.” The Chief states while throwing his cigar over the edge. Wraith stared at him, processing the words. Chief wasn’t some power hungry man but a man of conviction and the man who gave him the opportunity he remembers praying about as a kid. The Chief stood, towering over him. “I need to return back to Preston before he loses his mind about this Kage Code, you head to your Bytesmith, get a tune up on your gear, and rest. I promise you that once Luc Renault is found that you will be off to his location to complete your initial mission and execute him.” Wraith nods in acknowledgement as Chief stomps his way back to the war room. The conversation filled Wraith with a little more closure as he stared intensely at the ring on his finger. The Chief and him were the only people in this world who knew that he was without cybernetics yet the world

depended on him. Wraith heads inside towards the elevator to go meet up with his Bytesmith and gain some much needed rest. Hitting the streets of this glowing city, people rush past either consumed with Synchronvisions or distracted by the constant barrage of advertisements. He doesn't mind the noise as it's all background static to the ever-growing thoughts of his past crowding his mind. Why is his past haunting him right now and crowding his mind, was it the affinity test or something much deeper that flooded his mind. Eventually, Wraith made it to his modest flat above a medical facility known as SomaTech in the Tenderloin district. Inside SomaTech isn't a normal hospital, it is actually a front for black-market cybernetic surgery, illegal genetic modifications, and the backdoor trading of rare medical tech. The place is run by an underground network of rogue doctors and biohackers, making it the perfect place for Wraith to not only live but get only the best technological advancements for his loadout. When it comes to technological advancements, Wraith doesn't go to anybody but his ByteSmith Sylas. Sylas is a man who is "In the know", as there is nothing he won't know or find out. He supplies Wraith with the most advanced tools and upgrades for his loadout and has been working with Wraith since he was eighteen years old. Sylas is a bit of a madman when it comes to upgrading as he is one of the most connected men in the world who operates in an underground lab in the sewer level of SomaTech. Sylas's creations are legendary as Aetherslug rounds were breathtaking when they hit the black market but his creations also tend to get him and Wraith into trouble with The Consortium. They always catch flack from Chief Voss about creating new technology as the thought of, "What if this dangerous tech got into the wrong hands?" is always the basis of the conversation. The Chief always brings it up but at the end of the debrief he always points to Preston Grant's face signaling that the worry comes from above him. The fact of the matter is no what kind of trouble they found throughout their six years together they've become brothers in

their own right. As Wraith steps inside the lab, Sylas waits for him in the back room, where a series of monitors display streams of data, an array of tools, and tech clutters all of his tables. He's surrounded by half-finished projects, his latest invention glowing softly in the corner and most likely bound to get the both of them in trouble. The ByteSmith in his element, comfortable in the chaos. His face lights up when he sees Wraith, but there's an underlying tension in his eyes. "Back from Tokyo, huh? The city must be pissed at you." Sylas says, his voice laced with a hint of humor. Wraith tosses his gear on a nearby table, still stuck with the failure on his mind. "It feels like the world is against me, but that damn French Operative Luc Renault really outplayed me. It had to have been a damn setup!" Wraith says with frustration. Sylas leans back in his chair, steeping his fingers, taking in Wraith's every word. "Sounds like you didn't just lose the code, You lost control and have seemed to have lost yourself. I have told you for years to not go in blind without the full intel." Sylas states while tilting his head. "I didn't have a choice!" Wraith snaps, frustration rising. "The mission was urgent. Sara, my point of contact told me I just needed to find my way up to the code for a quick snatch and grab but somewhere throughout the mission there was a leak." Sylas chuckles dryly. "She must've been pretty if you didn't ask for more details. A pretty woman would bite you in the ass." Wraith falls silent for a moment, the weight of his failure hanging heavy in the room. The mission was a mess, but Sylas was right as he lost who he was and it felt like everything was all out of place. Sylas taps a few keys on his terminal, pulling up encrypted data streams. "It's not the end of the world. I've heard everything from the moment you attached the Spectre Suit from Luc Renault, to the affinity protocol, and to that final talk with the big two in the conference room. A lot of pressure coming your way huh?" Wraith looks at him with slight concern. "It's not the end of the world, I know once they find this oui oui ass operative that you're back in action. You'll recover but you need to be careful as this

failure could catch up only if you allow it. There will be no running from it if you get to that point.” Wraith exhales sharply. It feels like his life did a one eighty making everything more difficult like he hit a storm. Sylas stands up, a serious look on his face. He walks over to a shelf lined with vials of glowing liquids, a few half-finished augmentations. He turns back to Wraith, the weight of his words heavier than usual. “Before you head upstairs to unwind, Wraith I’ve got a question for you. One you need to think about.” Wraith raises an eyebrow, but remains silent, waiting. Sylas pauses for a moment, as if he’s choosing his words carefully. “Do you ever wonder why you keep doing this? Why do you keep running, fighting, keep putting yourself in the line of fire for causes that are never your own? Do you really think you’re doing the right thing? Or are you just a ghost, chasing the next mission because you’re afraid of what’ll happen if you stop running?” The question hangs in the air like a shadow, impossible to ignore. Wraith’s expression hardens. He knows Sylas is right as he’s been running for so long, but maybe he’s never asked himself why. The thought stirs something deep inside him, a question he’s too afraid to answer. “Think about it.” Sylas adds, his voice quieter now. “It’s easy to stay in motion when you don’t take a second to assess the damage.” Wraith doesn’t respond immediately. He just nods, his mind already racing. He needs to think. He figures out what’s next not just for the mission, but for himself. With that, Wraith heads upstairs to his apartment, leaving Sylas behind with the question that clouds his mind. Wraith sat in the dim light of his apartment, with the flickering neon glow from the street below casting eerie shadows on the cracks of the walls. The city’s hum was a constant reminder of the chaos that waited beyond his door with a promise of danger. He leaned back in his chair, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the scar over his right eye, a thin, jagged line that had been there for as long as he could remember. Sylas’s words echoed in his mind, sharp and relentless: “Do you ever wonder why you keep doing this? Why

do you keep running, keep fighting, keep putting yourself in the line of fire for causes that are never your own?" Wraith closed his eyes and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He had been avoiding the question all night, but it was there now, inescapable twisting in his gut like a live wire. Why do I keep doing this? His mind drifted back to Tokyo. The mission that had gone wrong. The code he hadn't been able to retrieve. The fact that Aika and Sara had prior notions of who he was as a person. And then, the scar over his eye. He hadn't thought about it in years, but now it was impossible to ignore. In his sleep, the memories resurfaced. The cold, sterile air of the Shinzai Corporation, the sound of footsteps echoing in the supply bay, the flashing lights of the security alarms all rushed back to him in an instant. Something was different, the Black Phantom was drawn as he went for the Kage Code but as he reached a low mechanical voice spoke behind him. "You're going to pay." He trembled as he spun around, just in time to see the glint of steel. A figure in a black tactical suit lunged at him, a knife flashing in the neon light. Wraith barely had time to raise his arm in defense before the blade slashed across his face, the sharp edge cutting through his skin like paper. Pain exploded in his head, and the world went black. Wraith woke with a jolt, gasping for air, his hand instinctively going to his face. He could still feel the phantom pain from the scar, the rawness of the wound felt as if it had burned into his skin. He blinked rapidly, trying to shake the dream out of his mind. The apartment was silent, The walls felt too close, too suffocating. He reached for the water on his nightstand with his hands shaking slightly. As he drank, he tried to steady his breathing, pushing the thoughts of Tokyo away. The past was gone. He couldn't change it and only could move forward. That didn't stop the Sylas's question from lingering. Was he just a ghost, running from something deeper? And if he wasn't running from the past, what was he running toward? His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp trill of his comm device. He stared at the screen for a

moment, blinking in confusion. It was Sylas. Wraith rubbed his eyes, already exhausted by the weight of the question, but knowing that he couldn't escape it. He answered the call, his voice gravelly from sleep. "Wraith. Time to wake up." Wraith sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I need a minute, Sylas. I'm not exactly in the right state of mind." "Don't care." Sylas's voice came through, unbothered as usual. "You're needed. And this one's urgent. They found Renault and the lost code from Tokyo." Wraith froze at the mention of Luc Renault. He's the reason that Wraith felt he was in a funk and was causing so much turmoil in his life. Just the thought of seeing him was causing his blood to boil. "Luc?" Wraith's voice was barely a whisper. "Yeah." Sylas replied. "He's surfaced back in France ironically and probably trying to escape with the code." Wraith leaned back in his chair, his mind racing. The code that he had failed to retrieve and detrimental to not only The Consortium but more specifically Erebus was back in play. Sylas paused for a moment, then spoke with an air of urgency. "We've got a location, but we're not the only ones looking for him. I'll send you the full details but it looks like the transaction for the code was incomplete. You'll need to get to him before they do. It's your chance to finish what you started in Tokyo. I know you won't say it but I can feel your bloodlust through the comm." Wraith rubbed his eyes again, his mind spinning. He was blessed with the opportunity to write his mistakes and confront Renault about what had really happened in Tokyo. But this time, he couldn't afford to fail. The stakes were higher now, and the line between success and disaster was razor-thin. "All right." Wraith said, his voice sharper now and the adrenaline started to pulse through him. "I'm on my way to the insertion zone. Send me the intel." "Get moving Wraith." Sylas responds while abruptly ending the call. Wraith stood up, his body automatically slipping into the rhythm of preparation. Suiting up back into his Spectre Gear and loading up his Black Phantom with rounds. His mind kept drifting back to the nightmare. To Luc Renault. To the

mission that had failed, and to the scar that would never fade. He paused by the window, looking out over the sprawling city below. The lights, the shadows, the streets crawling with life. He could feel the tension in the air, like something was about to snap. "Time to finish this." He muttered to himself. With one last glance at his apartment, he stepped out into the night, the mission calling, the question still lingering in his mind: Why do you keep doing this?

Act 2: The Phantom of Marseille

The air in Marseille's Forgotten Quarter always tasted like rust and old secrets. This part of the city was once a lively port district and is now a crumbling mosaic of concrete ruins and scavenged tech. Abandoned storefront blinked weak neon through cracked windows, advertising currencies no one traded anymore. Rain fell slowly and acidic, painting an oily rainbow across the cobblestone alleys. Nestled behind a collapsed tunnel surrounded by decaying ivy was the safehouse but in reality it was a relic from an older war. Its structure was reinforced steel and carbon-ceramic plating but time had only made it a shell. To anyone passing by it looked like nothing more than another condemned relic of a forgotten conflict but Wraith's skin began to crawl as if his natural instinct knew better. Inside, it was eerily pristine. Low-lit biometric-locked compartments, scattered surveillance monitors, old Consortium tech partially gutted, and long-disconnected uplink terminal with dried blood smudged into its edge. Every surface felt like it was watching. Like Luc Renault had left his personal stamp all over the place. The air was stale, humming faintly with leftover static. It was a stage and Wraith was walking into a ghost's theater. The Marseille air was damp and Renault's safehouse was buried in a derelict building once owned by a Consortium shell company, long since burned from public records.

Nevertheless, the ping was clear. Luc Renault. The only person to ever outplay him. A French Agent, who had somehow stolen the Kage Code from right under Wraith's nose during the Tokyo run. Wraith hadn't forgotten the sting. He couldn't. The door creaked open to darkness. Inside, dust danced in beams of cold moonlight. As he slowly moved around the inside with his Black Phantom at low ready he eventually found a flickering holo-screen propped on a table. A video began to play without prompt. "Wraith! Monsieur! It's been a quick minute. I wondered how long it would take you." "You were always precise. But never be patient." The voice dripped

with that effortless French cadence. Luc sat in the recording wearing his signature gray overcoat, a glass of red wine in hand. "What a snob." Wraith thought to himself. "I didn't take the Kage Code alone. You should know that. No one could. The Consortium helped me. Sponsored me. Used me." "We're both pawns, but I broke the rules first." "Let's see if you're smart enough to follow the pieces I left behind." Then the screen glitched and coordinates flickered across it. Wraith memorized them before the message self-deleted. The safehouse had been converted into a twisted puzzle box. Luc had left behind fragmented audio logs, encrypted files, and taunting riddles each more revealing than the last. Wraith flips the busty photo under the harsh LED lights. The image shows Luc shaking hands with a seemingly powerful individual with his face scrambled. A timestamp is scrawled in the corner with the handwriting, "You think you know someone." Using his decryption PDA he began to look into the photo's metadata to see if there's anything left behind. After gaining access into the photo there was an embedded audio log with Luc whispering, "Power smiles in the open. The rot starts at the top." The photo wasn't just evidence but it's a betrayal caught in 4K. And a warning. Wraith took note and the next room's puzzle cracked open a false wall revealing a rusted briefcase. Inside: a physical ledger, thick with ink, blood, and code names. Bribes. Payoffs. Assassinations. All the information inside seemed to be linked with an unknown account number that sent transactions to Luc but the name "Noorshade" was written all over the ledger. Luc's voice rang again, "The Consortium control's the world to keep us safe but how is that possible when there's a problem coming from within the house." Wraith runs his fingers across the name Noorshade and begins to think about issues The Consortium is having from within. A light flickered loudly by a vent leading Wraith to walk by it, in the charred remains of a vent Wraith finds a scorched Saudi Passport, face melted, but the ID chip is still functional. He extracts the chip and begins to decrypt it and the name "Farid

Al-Nadir” appears on his device. “I once considered The Consortium a home but I took the wrong path and was in over my head. It led me to a dark place with an even worse outcome as I decided I’d rather take myself than let them take me. Not sorry but I pass the burden off to you.”

Wraith backed up from the vent and his foot pressed behind a corkboard with a rusted knife. Attached to the knife was a piece of cloth that bears a hand stitched sigil: An eye with a bisected lightning bolt. This was not The Consortium’s logo, this was something unknown. The safehouse spirals in on itself, each clue leading to the central chamber. A terminal flickers in the dark like a dying star. Wraith breathes deep into the dusty air and connects his device to attempt to crack the archaic operating system. The screen blinks to life: “The Kage Code has been sold.” “Capture the Flag tournament in Neom, check the attached coordinates.” “Bring your best code ripper.” “Winner gets the code. Or dies trying.” Wraith leans back. The storm’s just beginning. Wraith encrypted the terminal data and transmitted it to Chief Voss and Sylas as they connected onto a comm call. “Luc Renault is dead and from the data I just sent over, I don’t know how true are the words coming from him but for one there’s a leak within The Consortium and two The Code is in Saudi Arabia and available upon winning a Capture The Flag game. More information within the data.” Wraith relays with a concerned tone. Voss’s gravelly voice buzzed through his comms, “Copy that. You did good, Wraith. We’ll prepare for your deployment and I need to update Preston. Keep your head low till then.” Chief Voss ended his connection. Sylas then utters, “Was there any other data that...” A cold click echoed behind Wraith. He ended the comm and spun with his instincts screaming. The power in the building snapped off, plunging the room into darkness. Shadows moved. Two assailants in matte black suits burst through the rotted entryway, silent, fast. Their visors glowed with a faint red, no insignia. Ghost operatives. Not Consortium, not local mercs, Unknown. Wraith didn’t hesitate. With a flash of motion, he drew his pistol and

he fired once. A clean headshot. The first operative collapsed without a sound. The second lunged with a stun baton, fast enough to catch the untrained off guard. Not Wraith. He holstered the Phantom mid-spin. Side-stepped the strike, and slipped out his karambit. The fight got tight and up close and Wraith loved those odds. The attacker swung wild and Wraith ducked under, slashing upwards across the thigh. He followed with a reverse grip swipe across the arm, disarming the baton. The attacker tried to grapple but Wraith dropped his weight and jammed the karambit under the jaw, one quick and brutal thrust. The body fell limp. Breathing hard, Wraith wiped the blade on the attacker's sleeve. His eyes scanned the bodies. No ID nor tags but a symbol stitched into the inner lining of their jackets. An eye with a dissecting lightning bolt. He pulled out his phone, snapping a quick image. Whoever these ghosts were, they weren't there for him. They were hunting Luc Renault but they didn't know that he was already dead. Now they knew that Wraith was in the way. Wraith ducked into the alley behind the safehouse, his breath still ragged from the fight. He wiped the blood from his forearm, slid the karambit back into its sheath, and keyed into a secure line on the holo-comm. Sylas answered within seconds his voice calm but alert, the digital whirl of camera feeds humming in the background. "Yo, you ghosting again? You didn't even let me finish my sentence, I was about to send you the location for the extraction point." Wraith exhaled slowly. "I had a quick change of plans. I was just attacked. Two operatives, silent, no markings. Clean gear. They weren't a part of The Consortium. They were looking for Luc surely." he explains. There was a pause on the line. "You good?" Sylas states with the utmost concern. "I'm alive. They're not." Wraith says while sending the photo Sylas's console. It was uploaded with a soft ping. "You're an all knowing piece of shit, tell me that symbol rings a bell." Wraith snarks to Sylas. Sylas made a low whistle. "Never seen that symbol before. That's not on the public network militia or black-market mercs. Could be

off-ledger which means we're talking about a serious rogue group." Sylas begins to scratch his head in concern. "You think it's tied to what Luc was saying during his sick little goodbye games I just played?" Wraith asks. "Well in this world everything is tied to The Consortium...I'll dig into it. Quietly." Sylas utters to Wraith. "Is there anything else you need me to look up, you know what my motto is about not having all the information." Wraith taps his head then says look into the names "Noorshade and Farid Al-Nadir, they were the only names that seemed of any relevance." There was a short pause before Sylas continued, his tone shifting to urgency. "I'll look into it but for now, Voss says you need to move. We've got an extraction point in Lyon and the coordinates are already pinged to your watch." Wraith began moving again, cutting through the silent streets of Marseille as the glow of incoming nav data gleaned from his watch. "What's the rush?" Wraith asks. "The Capture the Flag event labeled as Neom Grid Siege kicks off in thirty-six hours. Al-Maari's fortress city is locking down, and we need our best team inside before the firewall seals." Sylas hesitated then began to giggle. That got Wraith's attention. "Why are you giggling and did I just hear the best team?." "Who is it?" Sylas smirked through the comm. "Let's just say she was in Tokyo and she's arguably the best code ripper in history." Wraith felt a cold grin tug at his lips. Aika. "Either way you have your coordinates so get to the extraction point and make your way to the middle east. I have a present for you that should help with the games. I'm out. Stay safe." Sylas says while logging off the comm. As Wraith moved through the neon-lit shadows, boarding a silent transport drone at the city's edge, Wraith stared down at the symbol glowing faintly on his wrist display. He didn't know who those operatives were...yet. But once the games in Neom began, he'd be ready to find out. Back in San Francisco only minutes after Wraith boarded his drone in France, inside The Consortium's dojo the sound of metal striking air cuts through the quiet. Preston Grant flows through a precise Wing Chun

form, his movements are flawless, calculated, machine assisted, and elegant in brutality. His exo-skeletal body amplifies every motion, pistons and servos whirring in harmony with each strike. Across from him stands Chief Arden Voss, arms folded, silent as stone. He watches with the patience of a man who's lived through so much shit that every new situation is just another storm that will pass. Preston finishes the sequence with a thunderous palm strike that splinters a carbon-fiber dummy in half. "You said there was movement?" Preston said without turning around. Voss Nods. "Wraith found Luc Renault dead in Marseille. The tip was real. But the Kage Code's already gone." Preston frowns, stretching his fingers as the exo plating retracts slightly to cool. "Gone where?" "Neom. Luc sold it to an unknown third party hosting a blacksite Capture The Flag Event. Real code, real blood. Winner gets the package." Voss states while lighting up a cigar. A beat of silence and a fog drifts across the edge of the dojo. Preston walks toward a towel wiping synthetic sweat from his face. "Have you ever thought about how convenient that is?" Preston says, coldly. "Renault could've sold it to anyone. Could've disappeared. But instead, he broadcasts the trail...then all of sudden turns up dead." He throws the towel aside. "It's a trap. And we're sending him into it." Voss's voice tightens. "I see that perspective Grant but he's the best shot we have." Preston scoffs. "Wraith? He's a relic, all his cybernetics are outdated, if it wasn't for him and that bytesmith of his Syllas he'd be a loner, we made him, and he's never once played by my rules." He steps forward, his towering frame casting a long, inhuman shadow. "I have read every file on him. Before Japan and before you brought him under your wing. Something about him has never added up. No ties, no traceable history. Just...shows up. And now, somehow, he's our best agent with no prior history to his name." Preston shakes his head and begins to laugh maniacally. "Funny enough he goes by Wraith." "I don't trust him. Never have." Voss doesn't flinch. "You don't need to trust him. You just need to stay out of his way."

“You forget who runs The Consortium, Arden?” Preston replies while stepping in close. “I don’t care if you were working with my father before he passed. I am the soul controller of The Consortium and you report to me. Don’t forget that.” Their eyes lock with tension heavy and unresolved. Voss finally breaks it, turning toward the wind-swept skyline. “We didn’t lose in Tokyo because of Wraith. We lost it because someone within your Consortium leaked our route to Renault. That leak came from the inside.” Preston doesn’t answer right away. He returns to the center of the mat, resets his stance, and begins another Wing Chun form strikes, getting faster, more aggressive. “Then you better hope Wraith finds something useful in Neom.” Preston scoffs at Voss. “Because if he doesn’t...I will personally be the one to pull the plug on him. For good.” He says while dealing an intense blow. The wind howls louder now. Somewhere far above the cloudline six hours flew and Wraith’s drone hummed toward Saudi Arabia and into the fire. The drone hummed like a mechanical serpent through the crimson skies above the Saudi desert.

Wraith sat strapped in, the dry heat crackling outside the reinforced hull. A soft chime broke the silence. A panel across from him flickered to life and there she stood. Aika. She stepped into the cabin via the side entrance just as the drone began its descent. “Still alive?” she said with a sly smile. “Good.” Wraith smirked, “More or less” Wraith took a double look at Aika who looked elegant in a long red dress. “Don’t burn holes at my dress by staring too hard.” Aika snarks while tossing a sleek black case into his lap. “You look absolutely stunning.” Wraith responds while opening the case. Inside was an adaptive suit made with smart-fiber and a pair of sleek cybernetic contact lenses. “Thank you for the compliment now, be a gentleman and be a woman’s plus one to this opening ceremony. I honestly think a woman of my stature deserves to walk in and be someone’s eye candy.” Wraith smiles and nods in agreement. “Sylas wanted me to hand these over to you. He said your PDA’s a fossil and these contacts will do the heavy lifting

from now on. Comes with AR overlay, net tracing, and signal jamming. Everything but making coffee.” Wraith finished putting on his suit and the smart fibers adjusted to hug his body. Wraith slid the contacts in and his vision flooded with holographic HUD overlays that pulsed in green and amber. “Stylish,” he said. “Let’s hope they don’t fry my brain.” “No promises” Aika replies while holding her hand out to be accompanied out the door like a lady. The ceremony was held in the atrium of The Skyspike Hotel, a towering obsidian monument that stabbed into the Saudi night like a monolith from a dream. The atrium brimmed with a plethora of people and mixed in were cybergangs, hackers, warlords, and private military tech teams. A stage lit in gold shone at the head of the chamber. There stood a tall commanding native man cloaked in ceremonial black and bronze with eyes sharp like desert hawks. As he raised a hand, all voices in the room dropped into a silence. “Welcome to the Neom Grid Siege” he began. “This contest will test not just your skill..but your loyalty, your endurance, your will.” “The prize is simple. The Kage Code. Clean, untouched, and ready to weaponize.” Whispers started to spark around the room. “Win the flags. Keep your team alive. And remember treachery is not forbidden.” As Wraith scanned the crowd, his eyes locked onto Sara whose red hair, charm, and aura was something that he could never forget. She leaned casually against a marble column, sipping gold-rimmed champagne. “Well, if it isn’t the Ghost of Tokyo.” Sara purred as Wraith made his way from behind. Wraith grinned. “Didn’t know I’d be in for a full Tokyo reunion within a seventy-two hour span.” he responds in a flirty tone. Sara begins to look around the atrium, “Full reunion must mean that the stunning woman in the red dress must be Aika. Though we never formally met in Tokyo and only exchanged words via comm, I must say I’m a little jealous that she’s stolen my arm candy.” Sara states while asking for another drink. “I will say though it’s a little odd that all of us are still alive after failing such a crucial heist for The Consortium as failure is

never an option, I honestly didn't think you'd live long enough to see me again. I guess hope is something we have." The bartender gains her attention and pours her a drink. "Nevertheless, Still owe you that date and maybe you can earn it." Aika states with a smile. "Name the price" he responds quickly. She nodded subtly toward the native man on stage. "Talk to him. The Consortium and I were able to get him to hire me as his private escort for this event, guess the older crowd still loves the company of a younger woman. Two things that we know is that one he's running this bloodsport and he's known to make big bets. Make the most of it." She gave a wink and made her way towards the casino floor. The room glowed red and gold, filled with velvet seats and veiled secrets. Wraith approached the main table where the native man sat seated like a king behind a tower of chips, cigar in hand. Two hulking guards moved to intercept Wraith. "You don't walk up to the table unless you're invited." one of the guards. The man waved them off curiously. "Let him through, I'm bored." he says while puffing on his cigar. Wraith sat cool and calm. "I hear you're a betting man." Wraith fires to the man. "And I bet that you like my escort." The man fires right back to Wraith while pointing at Sara. "Both of those statements seem to be true." Wraith says while shrugging his shoulders. They both exchange sharp smiles. The cards were dealt for blackjack and the game began. For the native man it seemed odds were in his favor as after the first three hands the only number that appeared on the table for him was twenty-one. On the other hand Wraith's hands were terrible. He was stripped clean on all three hands, it seemed like he was just trying to give the casino free money at this point. The man grinned, ego. "Seems like you can't win a hand, I almost kind of feel bad for you" he laughs. Wraith puts his last stack forwards. "One more round. If I win this hand..I get a night with your beautiful escort." The guard stiffened up, but the man laughed loud with joy. "I like you, a lot of risk in your body but foolish men like yourself make the best stories. Fuck it

let's run your gamble and I'll even put my entire stack." the man states while risking everything on this hand. They played. The man was eager as he swiftly hit with a ten and six hoping for a winning hand, but hope wasn't on his side as his next card was a queen busting him instantly. He lost all his winnings. Wraith however was a master of patience and carefully examined each card. Dealer offered him a four, followed by a nine. He hesitated at first then took a card giving him a total of twenty. Wraith's eyes flickered. After a few tense moments the dealer flipped his cards and revealed a nine and a six, only to pull a seven busting him. Wraith raised a victory eyebrow while the man sat still for a long moment. Then he leaned back and clapped slowly. "Well then. Tomorrow night, she's yours. Try not to bore her." Wraith stood up, scooping up his winnings and tossing a couple chips to the man. "No promises but here's a couple chips to buy your friends some drinks for your stories about foolish men." he says while laughing. From across the room, Sara raises her glass smiling. She then slips away and heads for her suite. Wraith left and entered a suite in which he was sharing with Aika. She was already in a deep code-break mode, feeding network data at the touch of her fingers. She looked up, unimpressed. "Please don't tell me you didn't trade Consortium secrets for a date." "Nope. Just my dignity and some poker chips." Wraith responds while laughing. Aika rolled her eyes. "I will say though Sara mentioned that you two never formally met in Japan and she was a little jealous I had a nice piece of arm candy." he explains with a smile. "Well looks like she knows competition when it's in her face but, as flattered as I am while you were busy scoring a date. I decrypted the local network nodes. Tomorrow's grid is a five zone system: Desert, Boneyard, Solar Fields, Plateau, and the Core Tower. Each team gets one spawn zone." she urges Wraith. "Did you find the flag locations?" he responds. "Scattered and rotating. I'll guide. You run." she states while completing her session. Wraith leans against the window, the lights of Neom glittering below like code on a terminal.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks. Aika Smirked. “I’ve always been ready. You just keep that pretty face from getting shot.” They both chuckled and the countdown to the game ticked closer. Tomorrow, the hunt for the Kage Code would begin and Wraith was ready.

Act 3: Neom Grid Siege

Wraith stood on a steel bridge suspended in nothingness. Around him, reality crumbled. He began to shoot The Black Phantom in the darkness and blood began to drip from his hands. A voice echoed from the void. "You failed. You lose everything." The bridge cracked beneath his feet. Sara vanished, Aika's scream distorted, and Chief Voss turned his back. The Kage Code falling from the sky, slipped through his fingers once again, shattering into light. He jolted awake-soaked in sweat, heart hammering like a war drum. The hairs on the back of his neck began to stand on their own. "Wraith" Aika's voice called out soft but alert. "You were mumbling very nervously." He sat up, still breathing heavily. "Just a dream" He muttered. "Or maybe a warning of what's to come." Aika leans against the wall, arms crossed. "This about Tokyo?" she says while fixing her hair. "It's always about Tokyo." Wraith begins to rub his temples. "Ever since I failed that job, it's like everything's unraveling. The Consortium's pulling away. Preston doesn't trust me. I'm starting to feel like...I've already lost. That I'm lost." Aika's expression softened. She sat beside him. "You got secrets? She asked, watching him closely. Wraith hesitated. His mind flashed to the one truth he never told her or anyone, that he had no cybernetics. Nothing to give him an edge. No neural implants. Just his gut, training, and the ghosts that followed him. "No." he lied. "Nothing to tell." "Funny." Aika smirked. "Because every time your hair stands up, you look like you're facing a test you don't know the answers to." He chuckled dryly, avoiding eye contact. "You're avoiding something." she said suddenly and seriously. "And if you stay lukewarm like that, you're letting the enemy win your soul." Wraith said nothing. "Life is not in your control." She continued. "Time, Paths, Outcomes. None of it. The more you try to chase control, the more maddening your life will become. Don't trust your heart because it lies." She stood, adjusting her jacket and gear. "I pray that you one, find the

answers you're looking for and lastly you get those answers from the ways you were taught when you were young, because I know it's still deep in your heart." Wraith stares at the wall as hearing her words just struck him just as deep as the questions Sylas posed to him before he left San Francisco. Why was there so much warfare within his soul is something he began to question himself. He quickly just remembers how life was before that night his family was killed, how peaceful life was, and just how much love and protection was shown within that small church community that all came together with shared faith that everything would work out as long as they put their trust above. He started to question whether he even was supposed to leave with Chief Voss that day or should he have been put to rest like the other anomalies years ago. The question in his mind now, "Is this life that was chosen for me?" Deep down he knew he wanted something more peaceful even with the lack of cybernetics. "Sorry to drop such a bomb on you." Aika states while caressing his cheek. "But right now, we've got a few hours before the game begins. So...Are you suiting up or sulking?" He nodded, dragging himself out of bed and that funk he felt. He equipped himself with the Spectre Suit and loaded up The Black Phantom. Wraith was ready to complete these games and find those answers. As Wraith and Aika made their way to the stage you could only see how massive it was being set under Neom's blinding morning sun and televised to the locals within the grid. Five teams stood poised like predators on a battlefield. The Cybergang was the first team on the left, with a chain of cyberware advancements, neon-hair, and dripping aggression. Next to them were some low-level hacker types who were scrappy, cocky, but loaded with black-market tech. In the middle were warlords who were mixed with ex-mercs and raiders who were ruthless and loud. To the furthest right of the room stood a private military group who were suited sleek, silent, and armed to the teeth. Last team to walk in was Wraith and Aika who were just two shadows in a sea of monsters. The

other teams laughed at them. “Two of you? What is this, a cosplay run?” one cybergang member mocked. “You’re gonna die fast, pretty boy.” A hacker chimed in from across the room. Wraith just stared at him saying nothing with. Aika’s eyes flickered. She was completing a silent hack. The hacker that jawed at Wraith suddenly screamed, grabbing his head, eyes wide. He started clawing at his teammates, frothing at the mouth. “What the hell is wrong with you!?” one of his teammates yelled before being stabbed with a shard of glass. From the far right corner of the room a sharp crack echoed. A bullet split the psycho skull. He dropped instantly. Silence filled the room. The sniper, cold as ice, said nothing. “You just shot someone on our side!” a cyberganger roared. “We’re not on the same side you fucking idiot! And I traced that hack back to her! She hacked his neurology without any tech! She’s a fucking witch!” the hacker states while shaking and pointing. Aika smiles sickly towards him and blows a kiss. Tension surged as fingers were on triggers, rage in the air and suddenly the native man walked onto the stage. At his side was Sara who strolled in with casual grace. “Enough” the man states in a deep and commanding voice. “I said anything goes, I never said when it had to start.” He raised the data to a screen above him. “First team to capture three flags wins. Only one team will be claimed as winners. Only one will survive.” the man says while beginning to smile largely. “The assigned zones are Hackers: Desert, Cybergang: Boneyard, Warlords: Plateau, The Duo: Solar Fields, and Private Military: Core Tower. NOW!” he begins to get louder and festive.” “LET THE NEOM GRID SIEGE BEGIN!” The teams split off into their home flag locations and were contained by a digital cylinder. Aika and Wraith look at each other and she gives him the game plan. “I’ll play defense and you run on the offense.” “I trap their minds, guide your legs, and we win this quick and clean.” A large countdown from above the grid began to drop from ten and once the clock hit zero the digital cylinder dropped. Aika and Wraith split off. Wraith sprinted across the terrain

and with his new contact lenses his HUD lit with real time feed updates from Aika. Another big score for Syllas. He made his way from the Solar Fields and hit the desert portion of the grid. Once his feet touched the desert terrain the hackers tried a stealth push to their flag. Rage filled up their minds as a team of four hackers trying to silently push up on Aika as she peacefully guided Wraith to their flag with her eyes locked into a deep cycle. As they approached the location, Aika's traps activated as neuroburst, mines, and optic scrambling began causing two of the four hackers to scream and collapse. "Try hacking me back, amateurs." she laughs while whispering. Out of the other two remaining one began to try and hack into her cybernetics while the last one lunged at her only to be tased ultimately frying his chip. The last one looked up as he finished his hack but once the code executed it blew up right back into his face. Aika secured the flag with ease. Back on the offensive side of things, Wraith infiltrated the hacker camp. The final member defender spotted him and began to try and hack him but noticed something was off, but he was too slow. His karambit flashed and he was sliced down with ease. Using his new contacts he was able to quickly hack into their base flag, seize it, and return it back to Aika on the Solar Fields. Two Flags in their possession now. The cybergang tried to make their way onto Core Tower with three modified hoverbikes charging fast, loud, and chaotic. The sniper from earlier defending his territory picked them off like insects. One. Two. Three. The amount of bullets it took to leave the three charging for the flag lifeless on the floor. Bullets placed perfectly in between their eyebrows. On the other hand the remaining two of the private military companies made their way into the boneyard. It was a two versus six situation leaving the military group outnumbered. "We've got them outnumbered! Charge them!" one of them said. Four of them begin to charge and split off creating a two versus one situation per man. The first two versus the katana wielder began to spray bullets in his general direction causing her to take cover quickly.

After taking cover she quickly activated camouflage that masked her presence. One of the cybergang members went over towards her last known position spraying the rest of his magazine. “Where did you go pussy?” From the shadows the katana user appears cleanly cuts his head off horizontally and thrusts the blood off her blade with ease. The other military member was much larger and more brutal with his approach as he walked down on the two cybergang members. “DIE YOU BIG BRUTE!” one of them screamed. The large man laughed as the bullets reflected off his armor and bullets grazed his face. “I’m gonna smash your face in.” He says with a large smile activating his apex gauntlets giving him Kong like strength. He slams his fist onto the ground causing tremors within the terrain and the two of his opponents to fly into the air. He charges at the one closest to him in the air and begins to bombard him with a flurry of punches that left the cybergang members body flat and unresponsive. The other opponent, scared shitless, got up from the ground and began to run towards his flag tower in fear. The brute military member laughed and expanded his arms horizontally causing him to get into a T-position. His arms began to charge and create what seemed to be the sound of a jet engine. After a few quick moments the arms were fully charged and he slapped both his hands together in a clap motion. The non-existent wind within the grid became a piercing shot that quickly met the running cybergang member leaving him nailed to their tower like a bug on a windshield. “Weak” he explains while his arms begin to cooldown. The katana user began quickly stepping up towards her last enemy. “STOP MOVING YOU BASTARD!” the cybergang member says while panicking. “If you say so.” the katana user whispers in his ear. The member’s face dropped in fear as the blade ripped him in half from the heart down. The last two up on the tower trying to defend the flag nervously screamed on their comms, “RESPOND. WHAT IS GOING ON DOWN THERE. WHAT ARE WE DEALING WITH?” “You won’t be dealing with anything

else in life soon enough.” The brute says while slowly walking up towards both of them. One of them shoots while screaming, “DIE MOTHERFUCKER!” Then from the shadows a katana blade slices his hands clean off. His body dropped to his knees and his head was cut clean off. The remaining cybergang member dropped his weapon and gave way to the flag hoping that they would spare his life. “Thank you.” The katana user says as she grabs onto the flag securing it. “You’re welcome, please I have a girlfriend that I really....” were the last words that member said before the brute smashed his skull with one fist into the ground. The brute begins to chuckle. “I love squashing bugs.” The score was now Two Flags: Military, Two Flags: The Duo, and One Flag: Warlords. The Warlords had a different strategy that consisted of having all of them stay home and defending, then move for an all out attack against the different locations. They had the right idea as when Wraith reached the warlords’ base in The Plateau all you could see were spiked walls and tribal logos blowing in the dry Neom winds. Wraith crept along the northern scaffold, the shadows of the spectre suit bleeding into the steel. His breath steady, karambit ready, and The Black Phantom holstered to his hip. “Two military signals just entered from the south.” Aika whispered in his comm. “You’re not alone anymore.” Aika’s visual overlay painted six red warlord heat signatures across the bay. Hulking figures, armored in scrap metal and tribal paint, armed with machetes, ballistic clubs, and chain guns. Suddenly. A flash grenade. Gunfire erupted. The military team had struck first. Wraith stayed low, watching as two elite operatives charged in. They tore through the outer guards. “They’re not here to wipe them all.” Aika muttered. “The sniper from earlier sent a message to the two saying snatch the flag and vanish.” The brute smashed through a guard tower, collapsing it on two warlords. The katana-wielder blinked from one shadow to the next, carving through tendons and throats with lethal elegance. But the warlords didn’t fall easily. The warlord captain, a towering figure with a rust-red mask

and a railgun-axe, screamed and hurled an explosive spear. It detonated between the brute's legs, staggering him. Another warlord rained down from the fire above, pinning the katana user behind cover. "You need to move now, Wraith!." Aika hissed. He dropped into the chaos, landing between the military team and the warlord rear guard. One warlord turned with a snarl, charging. Wraith fired two shots. Chest. Neck. Down. The other came swinging a scorched hook-blade. Wraith ducked under, sliced his achilles, then spun and buried his karambit into his throat. A third warlord tackled him against a wall. Concrete cracked and the warlord's blade was at his head. He froze and his chest was heavy. Wraith earned that scar over his right eye during his very first mission. It was a reckless protection mission in Cuba, where he was ambushed by a cyber-augmented bounty hunter. Outgunned and unprepared, Wraith barely survived as Chief Voss saved him by causing a distraction that made the hunter retreat. Wraith took a blade across his eye that nearly ended his career before it began. That scar across his eye became a grim trademark, a warning to others and a memory carved in flesh. A reminder that gear is real and survival is earned. After that mission, drenched in blood and silence, Chief Voss placed a firm hand on his shoulder stating, "That mark? It's not a shame, it's the truth about the career I chose for you. But if you stick with me Wraith and trust no one else, you'll never have to feel that fear I can feel pulsating through your body again." "ARE YOU GONNA FREEZE OR FIGHT WRAITH?" Aika barked. "MOVE!" She then initiated a neural spike through his comms and the warlord screamed clutching his skull and turned the blade into himself. "I've got your back, forever." She snapped. "Go!" Wraith stumbled forward. "I copy, Thank you." he says recomposed. The military duo grabbed the warlord's encrypted flag and began sprinting toward the west corridor back to their Core Tower. "They're running!" Aika shouted. "That flag makes three in their possession and if they decrypt both, they win!" Wraith surged after them through

the back exit, lit only by low lantern drone and then flicker of distant combat. The two operatives moved like wolves that were trained, merciless, and efficient. The brute was plowing through the terrain while the katana user blinked from cover to cover. Wraith was firing his regular pistol rounds and missed. They were too fast. "One of them has the flag." Aika informed. "But he's not carrying it. You need to figure out who." They reached an open clearing near their Core Tower and the katana user dropped back, blocking Wraith's advance. Shee charged slashing but Wraith parried with his karambit, sparks flying. The assassin was quick, but predicated for Wraith. Wraith feinted left, drew the Black Phantom and shot through the cloak, grazing the woman's side. The katana user staggered but not before slashing Wraith's arm, drawing blood. The brute turned, noticing the slowdown. "Sniper is still up high!" Aika warned. "You're in the open!" Crack. A bullet tore through the dust beside him, barely missed. "Help me, PLEASE!" Wraith panted. "Snipers an overwatch and he won't miss again!" "He's out of range for a personal hack but I can jam his gun for 20 seconds. Use it once I initiate the hack" Aika urged. Wraith waited. "Jamming now." Click. Click. Nothing. The sniper cursed. Wraith sprinted towards him and slid down the ridge to where the sniper was. He took a hit to his shoulder while the pain was flaring. But he made it. The sniper turned to draw his secondary pistol but it was too late. Wraith slammed the karambit in his chest and fired one round into his skull. The sniper was down. Wraith saw it again. The Eye with a lightning bolt logo. His heart stuttered. That symbol again. Same as the one from France. "Wraith! The last military guy's decrypting their final flag! You have to shoot him now! Wraith blinked back to reality and he raised the sniper rifle. He quickly inserted an Aetherslug round then exhaled and focused. He pulls the trigger. BOOM. The brute drops mid-decrypt with a huge hole between his chest. A moment of silence goes on as Wraith walks over to the flag and finishes the decrypt. A horn blares across the grid once he finishes.

“NEOM GRID SIEGE VICTORS ARE: THE TEAM OF WRAITH AND AIKA!.” The native man’s voice blared across the intercom and cheers from the crowd spanned across the dome. The Neom Grid Siege was over. As the digital grid around the arena shut down and silence settled over the battlefield, Aika dialed into her encrypted comm as Wraith stood beside her, bruised and silent, the sniper rifle still gripped in his hand. “Sylas.” Aika said, her voice firm. “We secured it. Kage Code is ours.” There was a slight pause before the Bytesmith’s voice came through. “Copy that. Sending the news to Voss now. Nice work out there, both of you.” Wraith let out a short breath, rubbing his temples. “Tell him the new contacts were a damn good upgrade. Feels like I’m seeing the world for what it is now.” Sylas Chuckled. “Glad they worked. Now for the real update.” As Wraith walked away to tend to his wounds, Aika straightened, her expression tightening. “I’ve been tracing some threads from Wraith’s earlier run-ins.” Sylas begun. “I pulled an image from a corrupted data pool. It matches Farid Al-Nadir. Does he look familiar?” Aika went into shock for a second as a photo was uploaded. “It’s the man who is running this event!” she whispered. “Exactly, he was once a high-ranking member of The Consortium. Real Idealist type at first until he got obsessed with status. When he realized he’d hit a ceiling, he walked. Vanished. Re-emerged in the black market with deep pockets and dirtier connections seeking fame.” Sylas notifies her. “So he was the one who bought the Kage Code from Luc Renault?” she responded quietly. “Yeah.” Sylas confirmed. “But I don’t think he ordered Luc to steal it. Renault got paid by him, but the records still originate to Noorshade as the origin of him even ending up in Tokyo. I have a feeling that whoever Noorshade is, hired the group with that mysterious logo Wraith found in Marseille.” Aika clenched her fists staring at the sniper that Wraith dropped as he tended to his wounds. “Well Noorshade must really want that code because one of the teams had the logo on their sniper. We’ve got multiple players now.” “Well that

information definitely confirms it.” Sylas states while scratching his head in frustration. “I’ll keep digging on Noorshade and that symbol but watch your backs. There’s a mole somewhere within this situation and I’m sure of it.” Aika stayed silent for a moment, then nodded. “And Noctis?” Sylas paused. “We know about his parents and his secret.” Aika exhaled slowly. “I’ll tell him. When the time’s right.” “Do it soon.” Sylas said. “Secrets get people killed.” Sylas hangs up and their comms cut out. In San Francisco, Chief Arden Voss stood in silence as the call from Sylas ended. He looked down at the table displaying the message: Mission complete. Kage Code retrieved by Aika and Wraith.” Arden took a deep breath and entered the war room. Four massive screens glowed above the wall showing The other four leaders of The Consortium and Preston Grant in his usual chair, fully geared in his exo-skeleton. “The Kage Code has been retrieved.” Voss stated plainly. “Wraith and Aika completed their mission in Neom. Biomancer, Iron Lotus, and Warlord smiled in turn. “Well done, she was efficient as always.” Iron Lotus stated. “Give them our commendation.” Biomancer replies. Warlord nods in agreement as one by one their screens blacked out. Cipher was the last one of the four still on comms and he stared at Voss and Grant with a scowl buried behind gold-plated cybernetic implants. Preston narrowed his eyes. “What?” The dealer didn’t respond. Instead, he laughed real slow then cut his connection. Voss turned to leave but Preston stopped him. “You got what you wanted.” Preston said. “But I still don’t trust that boy.” Voss paused in the doorway. “Last time we had a conversation about Wraith, you were in your feelings and you responded stating remember who you report to. I’m going to smoke and then I’m heading to Saudi Arabia in the Aerovance to pick up the Kage Code.” Preston’s fist clenched, slamming the table with a thunderous clang. “This isn’t the world I envisioned!” Voss shook his head and left. As the sun dipped below the glass towers of Neom, Aika and Wraith arrived at the main plaza and the starting point of the siege

was now transformed into a glowing hall of lights and celebration. All the teams that were once a part of the siege are now dead leaving Wraith and Aika to be celebrated by the crowd of people. The Native man who Aika was informed is actually Farid Al-Nadir took the centerstage, wearing a white keffiyeh and long robe laced with gold circuitry. Sara stood proudly at his side, her eyes flickering with hidden meaning as she looked at Wraith. Farid raised his voice and it amplified through the loudspeakers embedded in the arena walls. "Congratulations to our winners Wraith and Aika. You played with grit, strategy, and fire." Cheers rang out from all around the hall. "As promised" he said with a smile. "The Kage Code will be yours but not here. Join us tonight at the Victory Dinner and receive your prize." Wraith looked over at Aika, their eyes meeting in mutual tension. The battle was over and it was now time to claim their victory.

Act 4: Spiritual Warfare

With the Neom skyline shimmering under the dusk light, neon reflections danced all along the glassy walkways. Wraith stood under the amber glow of a tower's terrace, patiently waiting. Then the woman of the hour appeared. Sara. She was wearing a sleek reflective dress that caught the city's glow like starlight and a smile so stunning the blind could see. Their evening unfolded across hidden rooftops and velvet lounges, laughter echoing between wine glasses and honest glances, atop of the Skyspike Hotels quiet garden. Sara stares directly into Wraith's eyes trying to get a read on him then asks, "Be honest, why does a handsome devil like yourself go the lengths for a woman like myself." Wraith slickly replies, "Minus the good looks and amazing eye contact?" Sara giggles and nods. "There's this affinity about you that I have yet to get a real read on but my heart keeps pulling me to Sara." She stands up in shock then begins to look into the skyline. "So you're saying that I've stolen your heart?" Sara says in disbelief. Wraith nods then walks up to her side. "I feel as if the weight of the expectation that I have in this world all of a sudden disappears when you're around. Even as we speak right now on this lovely date, my heart is pumping out of my chest just thinking of you." "There's been a lot that has happened to me mentally since Tokyo and It feels as if I've been going through some trial where I make a lot of mistakes." Wraith pauses then grabs her hand. "Us meeting that night definitely wasn't one of them and I know that." he finishes. The stars began to blanket the sky and Sara's smile faded. "I need to tell you something." she whispered, leaning into his ear. She removed her earrings and Wraith's contacts began to adjust. After fully adjusting from the interference in the air the words "I have no cybernetics." softly came out her mouth. "These hide me from anomaly scans." Wraith stares stunned. He slowly lifts his hand showing the gold ring

on his finger. "Me neither, This ring. it's what cloaks me." A moment of silence passed as the feeling of trust brushed up against them so calmly. What followed after that moment was an intimate kiss where two individuals who shared the same fate felt as if they were in their own world where they weren't different but one of the same. A true moment of vulnerability and passion shared between two ghosts in a world of machines. After sharing a passionate kiss, the energy in the air had seemingly got more intense and passion crept as both of their hands intertwined and before they could tell they rushed to Sara's room. The vulnerability of being able to share a secret that makes you marked for immediate death let their emotions run amuck as the two began to share themselves. Before Wraith knew it, the moment came and went as a few hours after the two had made love he woke up to a blinding light from the window. Wraith looked around as Sara was nowhere to be found but instead on the pillow beside him was a note in cursive. "Had to leave early for the Victory dinner. Hope the little chase was worth it. Come find me after dessert <3.-Sara" it read in cursive. Wraith smiled cheek to cheek as this feeling gave him hope to find that love that he was in search for. The type of love that his parents had before they passed. He thought to himself quickly before leaving, "This is what I want in life, peace and love. Once I turn in the Kage Code, I'm going to retire and go ghost with her." He smiled even harder and went back to his room where Aika was also nowhere to be found. Instead he found a tailored black suit that was draped neatly across his bed with a note reading, "Try not to upstage me.-Aika" He once again laughed. "That girl is always looking out for me, she's a blessing I tell you." Wraith put on his suit and made his way to the dining hall for his Victory Dinner. He eventually reached The grand chamber which was brewing to be an amazing celebration. Wraith walked down towards Aika who was across from the Native man and Sara. Throughout the table all you could hear was joy coming from the people around as they laughed,

took lines, drank immensely, and filled their bodies up until their bellies looked like bombs.

Once he reached his seat, Sara gave him a flirtatious wink that was hard to ignore. Aika rolled her eyes. “He’s got good taste... even if it’s misdirected.” “Jealousy doesn’t suit you” Sara snaps back. The man raises his hand to silence the both of them. “Ladies please! We’re here to celebrate the show that you two lovely contestants put on to win the Covenant Kage Code!” He screams while pointing at both Aika and Wraith. “Me hosting this event was worth every Cyno in sponsorships as my hotel will now be known all around the world for hosting the event that is going to change the world!” “With that being said, as promised-” he sets the encrypted Kage Code between them, “To officially claim this code, one must crack the protective layer that I had installed, and the other will sign it to truly mark ownership. Aika cracked her knuckles then stared at the drive, seconds passed before the encryption was already dropped. Wraith took the drive and pressed it along his ring’s interface and it signed the Kage Code etching his name in the light. The room erupted in applause and cheers. Suddenly Aika’s tone sharpened. “Tell me, Farid.. Or should I say Farid Al-Nadir? What do you gain out of this?” The cheers in the room fell deathly silent. Wraith frozen had flashbacks of seeing that name in Marseille erupting in his mind. He looked at Aika in confusion, “How do you know that name?” Farid smirked, sipping his wine. Wraith shook his head and his attention went towards Farid intensely. “Luc Renault and Noorshade. What do you know about them?” Farid waved him off. “Now’s a time for a celebration, not whatever conspiracy you’re pulling out of your ass. Remember what I said during blackjack about foolish men.” Wraith slams the table in anger and reiterates, “Luc Renault and Noorshade. INFO NOW!” A butler leans in and whispers to Farid. Farid stood up, “Apologies. Business never sleeps. Enjoy the night.” Farid scampers off with his butler and two guards not too far behind him. Sara turns her attention from Farid back to Aika with a smirk then

says, "Wraith kisses really well? Did you know that and I mean in every location?" She winks at Aika then turns her attention towards Wraith. "Can't wait for another round, see you later." She states while following Farid out. Wraith angrily storms outside of the chamber with Aika following him trying to keep up. When they returned to their room the door slammed. "You knew he was Farid! Why didn't you tell me?!" Wraith barks. Aika was shocked. "You left for your date with Sara before I could! I had Sylas's update but your head was all up that girls ass! Apparently your lips too!." Wraith's jaw clenched. "THIS ISN'T A TIME FOR JOKES, YOU HAD TIME! DON'T ACT LIKE YOU DIDN'T!" he angrily screams at her. She stepped forward. "Wraith... Sylas and I know your secret. That you have no cybernetics. That your parents were killed in that church." Wraith was baptized with fear. "What?" he replies. "We know about how the ring cloaks your genetic makeup to make you seem like one of us and how your mother and father were killed within the church when you were eight years old." The room seemed to tilt under his feet. He backed away. "You've known this whole time? You and Sylas? How?" Aika reached out. "We're all connected through something deeper than flesh and time's running out. I need you to make a spiritual decision about right and wrong, Fast. The fence is crumbling." Wraith's face twisted. "NO.NO.NO. That's too convenient. You knew everything. My past. How I'm an anomaly. You were closest to the Tokyo Heist. You were there." Aika's expression shattered. "Wraith, stop listening to your heart!" "Maybe it's been you and Sylas all along. Maybe you're The Consortium moles." She shook her head desperately. "We've protected you!" "NO!" He growled, ripping his hand away from hers. "You've been feeding me what I wanted to hear. Feeding me information and making me question my mental state. I know what's best for me, not you two. Guiding me like a damn puppet." Aika stumbled back as if she was struck, collapsing to her knees. "I trusted you, Aika." He turned, storming out in a fit of rage

leaving the door swinging behind him. Aika began to shed tears of defeat. Suddenly Sylls's voice echoed through her comms. "Aika, listen-Sara is Noorshade. She hired Luc initially in Tokyo but when he found she had Consortium ties then Farid bought it instead for his little showcase. She embedded herself as Farid's escort with the help from..." There was a slight pause from Sylls. "Voss." Aika's face went pale. "That means... Voss and Sara are the moles?" Sylls nodded in agreement with a face of disappointment. "They still handed Wraith and I the code so what's their play?" she questioned loudly. "I don't know, but listen. That logo with the lightning bolt splitting the eye. It's a group called the Anti-Consortium. Sara runs it." Suddenly, the room lights flickered. The door was sealed air tight. "Sylls?" she gasped. Gas hissed from the vents. Her body weakened. "AIKA! GET OUT OF THERE!" Sylls yelled in panic. Aika began choking and begging for air as before she knew it her body laid there lifeless. Farid's voice played through the intercom. "You were always clever, but even clever bugs get squashed. We have bigger plans than your narrow vision." Darkness consumed her. BANG! BANG! BANG! Wraith pounded on the door. "Sara! Open up!" She opened it, leaning seductively against the frame. "Wow, didn't know we had that good a time. Begging for more already?" "This is serious." he stepped in. "My heart's in this. With you. But Farid-he's ex-Consortium. Dangerous. We need to get out of Neom and take the Kage Code back to San Francisco. Sara tilted her head. "And Aika?" "She betrayed me, I don't know what's real anymore. I just know I want you safe." he states with a scrunched face. She jumps into his arms and kisses him slowly. "I trust you completely. I can't believe how easily I've captured your heart!" The two kiss one more time and begin to frantically pack her bags up. They both reached for her makeup case and almost everything fell out. "My bad that only happened because I was rushing." Wraith states. Suddenly in the corner of his eye a pin stopped rolling with the needle facing up. "I'll get that!" Sara

frantically states while trying to move him. Wraith reached over and flipped over the needle. On the other side of that pin was a black eye with a red lightning bolt splitting the middle. Wraith stared at it, stunned. “What’s this? WHY DO YOU HAVE THIS?” Sara’s hand trembled. “It’s... I... I’m sorry Wraith. This was the only way.” He backed away toward the door only to be met by Farid. CRACK! The shock rod hit his chest and electricity surged. As his body collapsed, his last vision was Sara kneeling beside him. “We got him, Voss.” she said in her comms. “We’re taking him to the extraction point and his signature is all over the code. Darkness. There was no light. No sound. Only the slow, rhythmic beat of his heart echoing through a colorless void. It reminded him of the Affinity Protocol. Wraith floated in nothingness-suspended between time and memory. Images around him danced like vapor: The smirk of Farid, Sara’s voice calling to Voss, Aika’s pleading eyes, the glimmer of his ring. A storm began to build in his chest-questions boiling, shame surfacing. Who are you, really? What have you become? Why do you run from the fire that forged you? He saw flashes of his childhood: A cross hanging in a crumbled church that Voss took him away from, his father’s cold body laying on the floor next to his lifeless mother whose last words were calling to him. He remembered the promise of protection and not from machines but something greater. Something eternal. But Wraith had buried that memory long ago. His once called family was shattered and his life became a life where betrayal was routine and ghosts became more reliable than faith. Now, stripped of trust, alone in shadow, a voice not loud but deeply steady called from within him. “You’ve walked with the shadows too long. You’ve leaned on your own strength. But that strength was never yours to begin with. If you would return to the truth, even now, even after all this... you will not be forsaken. You will be made new.” Wraith felt something shift, a soft warmth pressing at the edges of his cold soul. Not forceful, not demanding, but inviting. Waiting for his surrender.

“You’ve been lukewarm. Half of the world. Half of the truth. But in this fire, you must choose. The fence that you lean on, It is not mine.” He felt the weight of all his sins, all the pride, the vengeance, the distrust, and in that moment, he whispered into the darkness. “Then take me. All of me. If there’s still light left for a man like me... I want it.” Suddenly, his body tensed. Light cracked through the void like lightning tearing through night. A roar of wind. A burning flood through his spirit. His father's voice echoed through it all, “He was always watching.” His mother’s voice softly followed “Even when you stopped speaking.” His mental imagery began to change as the darkness gave way to the flickers of cold blue light. Wraith’s eyes blinked open slowly, vision clouded, and throat dry. His limbs were restrained—wrists and ankles bound to a reclining chair bolted to the floor, wires trailing like roots from his arms into flickering biometric readers. The last thing he remembered was Sara’s voice and the searing jolt of a shock rod. Now she stood right in front of him, wearing a long obsidian coat with The Eclipse logo embedded on the chest. Her flirtatious demeanor gone, replaced by a cold, measured expression. Farid stood just behind her, hands clasped behind his back, eyes locked on Wraith with an unreadable intensity. “You’re awake.” Sara said softly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Wraith strained against the restraints. “Why?” Farid stepped forward, his tone calm and surgical. “Because you, Wraith, very soon you will be the reason for The End of Consortium and best of all The End of Erebus.” Wraith’s face tightens. “What are you talking about?” “We’re on the cusp of freeing the world from the illusions that The Consortium ever truly cared for anyone other than themselves. From the weight of their lies. You’ve spent your life as a ghost chasing shadows and now the shadows are showing their true faces.” Wraith’s breathing slowed as the weight of Aika’s words, Syllas’s warnings, and the betrayal of his heart for Sara crushed down on him like iron. He’d been stripped of allies, of trust, and of everything he thought tethered him in

this dark world. His heart raced, not in fear but in quiet rebellion. Deep within, in the caverns of his spirit something stirred. A voice not his own. Not a sound, but a presence. Gentle, persistent. Not demanding-inviting. He remembered the church back in Sausalito before his life changed and that place of faith was burned down. He felt his spirit kneeling asking for that peace once again. And now here, at the bottom of the world, bound and betrayed he was offered it again. Not in words, but in silence. Not in strength but in surrender. Do you trust me now, Wraith? When all else is stripped away? A breath escaped him. Not in pain. But in quiet acceptance. “You’re trembling,” Sara whispered, watching him with curiosity.” “I’m not afraid.” Wraith said, voice low but firm. Farid raised an eyebrow. “Bold words for a man chained like a relic.” Wraith looked up at them. There was clarity in his eyes now. A burning stillness. The beginning of a storm that had waited a lifetime. “I was blind...but I see now,” he muttered. Sara frowned and her skin began to crawl, sensing the change in him. Farid scoffed. “Let’s see how long that vision lasts. Once the patch goes live the world will crumble.” Farid turned and walked out, the hiss of pneumatic doors sealing behind him. Sara lingered, her expression softer. “You weren’t supposed to be like this... He said you were easier to control and to break.” Wraith looked at her-not with hate but with a strange compassion. “You don’t have to follow him.” She hesitated. Just for a moment. Then she left and Wraith was alone. But he wasn’t empty. Not anymore. More time had passed and footsteps began to echo towards him. Sara entered first, her eyes sharp with conviction. Farid followed now in a long tactical coat, face stormed with unease. Then came the last figure, Chief Arden Voss. Wraith’s breath caught. “You...”he muttered. Voss smirked. “I always admired you, kid. From the day I saw you take that scum's life for killing your parents. I knew you had potential, you weren’t just a survivor in this world without cybernetics, you were born for it.” Sara stood beside him, her posture proud. “You always wanted the truth, didn’t you?

Well, here it is” Voss stepped forward. “Preston’s reign is built on smoke and mirrors. I was his right until I saw how little vision he had. I deserved his position. I still do. So I made my own path.” Sara continued, “We sent Luc Renault to Tokyo with orders under my team Eclipse to extract the code and he succeeded but later went into a deep dive finding out that “Noorshade” had Consortium ties and it’s known that he despises The Consortium. He’d rather die than do business with The Consortium decided to play his hand and sell to the highest bidder.” Farid nodded. “That’d be me. I wanted a show the world wouldn’t forget. Eclipse gave me that show. The Capture The Flag event... it wasn’t just a game. The flags themselves were pieces of the decryption key for the Kage Code. Together, they made it open source.” Wraith’s eyes narrowed. “Why involve me and Aika?” Voss looked almost wistful. “Because I knew you two were...different. Syllas and Aika have unexplainable gifts. And you? You draw them together like gravity. It was fate.” Wraith’s voice hardened. “Then why the sniper during the games? Why the body count? Farid raised a finger. “The sniper was for spectacle.” Sara shrugged. “They were Eclipse loyalists. You’d be surprised how many live among us in this life. They knew the risk. But that logo you found? That wasn’t supposed to be there. Sloppy.” Wraith shook his head, disbelief mounting. “So what now?” Voss stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Now you’re marked. In less than an hour, the Kage Code goes open source with you and Aika’s signature on it. The world will believe you authored the leak. Preston will come for you...maybe even do it himself.” Sara smiled, seductive and sadistic. “But it doesn’t have to be that way. Stay with us. Join Eclipse. Give your heart to me. We can burn The Consortium to the ground. Together.” Voss added, “You’ve always wanted a family since that day they died. Peace. You can have it now. With us. I raised you for this very moment.” Wraith’s voice cut like steel, steady and unshakable. “From the beginning, all of this has been manipulation. You twisted my heart. But I don’t put my

faith in man anymore. I'd rather die than follow you." Sara stepped closer, her tone soft, alluring.

"I can give you everything, Wraith. A world without Erebus. A life where we love freely. Where no one controls us and we don't have to be anomalies." Wraith turned away. "No." Voss' tone turned grim. "Last chance. Deny us, and you die." Wraith met their eyes. Calm. Firm. Unshaken.

"So be it." Sara's jaw clenched. "You're a fool. You left Aika and she's dead in the room. You left Syllas and he'll be marked as an accomplice. No one's coming for you. You're going to die alone. For nothing." Voss added, "Preston will kill you. And this time...I won't stop him."

Wraith whispered, almost to himself. "Then let it be. My life was never in my hands." Sara's cold smile returned. "Then you'll burn with the rest of this building." She turned and barked, "Prep the explosive. Ten-minute countdown." Twelve men dressed in Eclipse gear marched in with so much firepower that the Skyspike Hotel would be reduced to less than rubble. Farid stepped back, startled. "Wait! We did not agree to blow up my hotel Sara!" Sara shoved him.

"Stop calling me Sara, my true name is Noorshade. Your deal's done. Your legacy's sealed. I'm doing you a favor now. Get out of my way." One of the Eclipse soldiers saluted to Noorshade and gave the thumbs up signaling everything was ready to go. Then the room plunged into darkness. A pulse of static sizzled through the air, then a digital snap. Everyone except Noorshade froze mid-step, bodies locking, pupils dilating. Their senses blind for sixty seconds which was just long enough. Aika emerged from the shadowed corridor like a blade through silk, kneeling beside Wraith. "Can you stand?" "I can fight." he responds boldly. With a hiss of metal, she cuts his restraints. In one fluid motion, she pressed The Black Phantom in one hand and his treasured karambit into his other palm. The soldiers groaned, twitching back to consciousness. Aika whispered, "Show them the spirit inside you." Noorshade began to scream in anger and started the timer for the explosives. "KILL THEM" she barked at her soldiers. The Eclipse

grunts swarmed. A soldier lunged at Wraith with a vibro-baton. Wraith blocked the swing with his forearm, twisted beneath it, and drove his knife into the man's throat. He wrenched the weapon free as another came at him. Aika flipped behind a column, activated a quick hack-Scorch. One soldier dropped his rifle, screaming as invisible flames surged through his neural implants. She sprang out with a spin, hurling a knife into the temple of a gunman about to shoot Wraith. Blood sprayed. She was already on the move again. Wraith dropped to one knee and fired two clean shots-one in the chest and one in the head of a soldier rushing down the stairs. He rolled over the body and used it as a human shield against a shotgun blast. "Left!" Aika called out. Wraith turned just in time to slam his knife into the gut of a flanking attacker, then used the falling body's momentum to spin and shoot another point-blank. Aika hacked a soldier's optics using Blind Loop. He began firing wildly. Hitting two of his own allies. She closed in a slit his throat, catching his sidearm mid-drop. "Six left!" She shouted. Wraith slid across a blood-slick floor, took cover, then shouted out the lights with precise aim, plunging them into deeper shadow. Using her eyes Aika casted an eerie blue light across her knives. Two soldiers advanced. She threw a blade into one's knees then another into his eye. The second raised a rifle, but Wraith shot his wrist clean through, disarming him before plunging his knife into the man's clavicle. Aika used AMP causing her movements to become blurry and quick like streaks of lightning. She launched herself between two Eclipse member elites and drove both knives under their ribs, twisting upward. Only two remained. Wraith saw the last rifleman running for the door so he kicked over a table, charged, and launched him airborne. His feet hit the man's chest, knocking him down. Wraith drove the butt of his pistol into the soldier's skull until it cracked. One more. The final soldier turned only to find Aika behind him. Knife at his throat. He whimpered. She didn't hesitate. Crack Gunfire silenced. Blood painted steel and stone. Wraith

stood with blood running down his arm, chest heaving, knife slick in hand. Aika turned, wiping a blade clean on a dead soldier's vest. Her breath was steady, eyes burning. Across the hall, Farid stood frozen, a knife buried into the wall an inch from his head. "You're not going anywhere" Aika states coldly. Wraith stalked toward him, eyes locked. "Where did they go? He demanded. Farid trembled. "I don't know-there was a private drone...on top of the Skyspike Hotel. It was pre-ordered for Voss and Sara. They were prepared." Aika grabbed Wraith's wrist. "Then that's where we're going." Aika took the knife from the wall and slowly cut Farid's cheek. "And you're lucky I don't shove this blade where the sun doesn't shine for trying to kill me." Farid dropped to the floor paralyzed. Six minutes until explosives set off. They turned toward the elevator shaft, flickering with red emergency lights. Wraith paused. "I need to say this, about earlier." She squeezed his hand. "No need. I feel the change within your spirit. And that..that's more than enough apology." Wraith gave a faint nod, jaw clenched in conviction. The flames of betrayal still smoldered behind his eyes but something deeper now stirred in his soul. Hope. Faith. Fire.

Act 5: A New Path

The door burst open into the cold, high altitude wind. Wraith and Aika stormed onto the rooftop, the city sprawled like a neon circuit board beneath them. A sleek black drone hummed nearby with its bay doors open, engine spinning. Noorshade and Chief Voss were just steps from it. “You’re not going anywhere!” Wraith shouted, gun drawn, still limping slightly from the last fight. Voss turned calmly, adjusting the cuffs of his jet-black coat. “You’re persistent,” he said. “Just like your father, I’m glad we put him down.” Noorshade gave a twisted grin, “You should’ve come with us. We could’ve made something beautiful.” “You made ashes.” Aika cut in, flanking Wraith with a blade in each hand, her arm twitching as she quick-hack for a short range EMP. Voss raised his hands mockingly to both of them. “What now? Kill us? You’ll be fugitives either way. Suddenly, Sylas’s voice cracked through Aika’s comms. “Aika? Wraith? Finally- there was heavy EMI down there, I couldn’t break through. I’ve got everything. Every word Voss said about destroying Erebus, about taking Preston’s place. I’ve recorded it all from the contacts and Wraith...” Sylas paused for a moment. “I’m proud of you. I’ve seen your path. You’ve found the truth.” Wraith’s jaw clenched. “Sylas, we need an exit. There’s a bomb in the hotel. Five minutes.” “Copy. Sending a drone to the far end of the roof now. Go!” The drone soared overhead, lights blinking, parking on the opposite side of the rooftop from Voss and Noorshade. Wraith stepped forward. “This ends here.” Voss smirked. “Not today.” CRACK! A flashbang exploded at their feet, throwing Wraith and Aika back. Noorshade and Voss bolted for the drone. “STOP THEM!” Aika screamed. Wraith raised his gun and fired. The shot raised his gun and fired. The shot grazed Noorshade’s shoulder causing her to stagger but still able to dive into the drone’s open hatch. Voss rolled in behind her, hitting the manual override. “WE’LL FINISH THIS ANOTHER DAY, WRAITH!” Voss yelled as the drone lifted into the stormy sky.

“You have forty-five seconds until detonation!” Sylas roared through comms. “Get to the far drone now!” They ran. Wind whipped around them. Smoke began to rise from the vents along the building's edges. The tower shook. Lights flickered. Fire licked through cracks in the rooftop. Aika reached the drone first, vaulting over a crate and diving into the bay. She turned back. “Wraith!” He sprinted as fast as he could while limping, but the explosion hit. BOOOOM! Flames erupted. The ground beneath him buckled, then vanished. “AIIIKAA!” he screamed as he plunged. The drone launched with Aika still staring in horror. Slowly but surely steel tore. Concrete snapped. Wraith’s body slammed through floors. Metal and fire clanged around him. The voice came again very calm, deep, and unwavering. “Even now, do you trust me?” Through the chaos, Wraith clenched his jaw, blood leaking from his brow. He whispered, “I do.” Then everything went dark. Sunlight filtered through white curtains. Monitors beeped softly. Wraith, no Noctis layed wrapped in gauze, bones bound tight, tubes running across his arms and chest. His eyelids fluttered. Aika was at his beside, bruised but still alive. Sylas leaned against the wall, tapping a screen. “You’re awake!” Aika whispered, squeezing his hand. “You made it back, Wraith.” “Noctis...” he muttered weakly. Sylas smiled. “It’s been a week since The Kage Code went live. We’re all marked for death.” He tapped the holo-screen. A reporter flickered into view. “GOOD MORNING, GOOD EVENING, GOOD AFTERNOON WHEREVER THE HELL YOU AT WELCOME BACK TO CONSORTIUM NEWS NETWORK! BREAKING NEWS: Five former operatives are now considered global traitors.” Five images of the five posed upon the screen. “Noorshade aka Sara, Arden Voss, Aika Okabe, Sylas, and Wraith. An unknown source reveals high-level footage exposing conversations between the ex-Chief and these Eclipse members. The open source code known as the Kage Code has the digital code signing of Wraith and has been live for a week causing immense disruption with our great Artificial Intelligence

Erebus. The footage was anonymously submitted to our station. Preston Grant responded earlier today..." Preston appeared, stone-faced in his command center. "I had no knowledge of Voss's betrayal to Erebus. I trusted him with my life. I am deeply wounded. But let it be known that The Consortium will not falter. All traitors, regardless of rank or history, will be hunted. And I will personally see to their reckoning." Sylas switched it off. "I sent the footage the moment we pulled you out of the rubble." Sylas said. "Got us safe here with someone I trust." Knock Knock. Aika turned. Sylas walked to the door. "He's here." He said. A man entered. Tall. Slender. His laugh echoed eerily through the room, a slow manic rhythm that sent chills down Noctis's spine. "You've grown, boy," the man said. "Been waiting a long time for this moment. Take this as repayment for something that you've done for me a long time ago" Noctis tried to speak, but his body failed him. All he could do was listen. "Fate and faith is what brought you here," the man said while stepping into the light. It was Cipher, one of the Top Five in The Consortium. "I worked with your father. We were on the edge of changing the world before that night at the church halted everything. He was the leader of our group...and you Wraith you are his legacy." Cipher leaned in closer. "They call me Cipher, but you already knew that. I've sat at the upper table of The Consortium for years and I've kept count all these years...When your father was in charge he was heavy on seventy-times-seven. Forgiveness. But I've counted every single sin, betrayal, and whoopity doo guess what. Last week's stunt broke the scale making it four hundred ninety one." Cipher smirked. "Funny, isn't it?" He stepped even closer. "Will you finish what your father started? Will you take that spirit you found, and change the world as you were meant to Wraith?" Noctis stirred, barely audible. "...call me..." he coughed as Cipher leaned in. "Say that again, boy." Noctis gritted his teeth. Blood crusted his lips. "Call me by my given name...Noctis. Wraith is dead." His eyes closed as he passed out from body exhaustion. Cipher's

laugh echoed louder than before, deep and wild. “He’s as tough as his father...and maybe even crazier.” He looked out the window at the rising sun. “The world...is just beginning to change.”