

0 - The War Of Life

Summerheart

[Alios]

Year 38 DW (Dry World) - 18th of Midautumn

The boat rumbled beneath Alios's feet. It seemed as angry as he was, to be stuck in the middle of the Western Sea while rain barraged his helmet. He clutched the railing as his seat jolted under him, salty sea water splashing onto his masked visor. Bookworm apologized to Chief as she regained control of the wheel, before cruising over roaring waves once more.

They had been riding south for the past three hours. The entire time, an endless blanket of black clouds stretched throughout the sky. Earlier, when Alios asked, Bookworm had assured she knew where she was going, but that hardly put him at any ease. Even with his nighttime visor illuminating the cliffside in a white fluorescent hue, it was still difficult to make out anything else in the rain. Occasionally, roaring waves would crash into the side of the boat, nearly throwing them into the rocky shore. But that nor the cold mattered to Alios, because that was the night that he would end the war.

Chief—the captain—sat at the front of the boat, unphased by the water drenching his Fullwhite armor. He was muscular and broad-shouldered, and some of the female soldiers said that he was quite handsome. Alios had seen Chief's file, and he could not deny that statement. A hardened yet soft expression, and young as well. Even just sitting, the captain seemed as such, as if the mask nor the black visor of his Fullwhite helmet could hide his confidence.

The captain's name was Theodore. He was a Julius, like Alios, but apparently he had grown up in The Nameless City. He *did* have a strange sense of humor to fit that claim; he called their navigator Bookworm, the sole reason being that she was an Aldrich. The Aldrichs were inadequate soldiers, but they were a studious Family. And they made nice clothes.

Stone was sitting just to Alios's left. He was a Quinn; a vain Family that valued money over most things, but they had a strong navy and military. Stone kept his rifle between his legs, the barrel pointed just above his chin. Alios thought to say something, but the last time someone looked at Stone funny they were stabbed during lunch with a fork.

The entire squadron wore Fullwhite armor, including Alios. The refined plastic was white—evidently—though some variants were black or grey, and the armor had plating that covered the body like a carapace. He had heard that the Lost World also had plastics, but they were hardly durable. Fullwhite was the best that The Prospect could supply. Wearing it always gave Alios a sense of comfort, knowing that bullets could not penetrate its shell, though he would never admit that to the others.

At the end of the boat, the last soldier, S, sat by himself near the motor. He wore the same armor, but he also had a thin red scarf tied around his left arm. That was how The Prospect distinguished Nameless from other soldiers. It only happened four months prior, when The Prospect drafted everyone from The Nameless City at least fifteen years of age. Alios had seen S's file the night before, and the boy had to be no older than that. The Nameless normally did not have files, but they had one specially made for S when Chief selected him to join their squadron personally. For all Alios knew, S was that boy's name.

Alios had never been to The Nameless City, and he always heard that the Nameless were ruthless and lived without rule or structure. But for S to have empty, dead eyes at such a young age . . . The boy lifted his head, sensing Alios's stare. Alios played it off with a nod. "You ready for this, kid?"

S lifted a hand to his ear. Alios's voice was lost in the wind. Alios made his way to the back, where the turbulence seemed calmer. He sat next to S. "Has the captain run through the operation with you yet?"

S kept his elbows on his knees, responding with a nod of his own. "Get in, plant the bomb, and get out."

"I assume you know how to work the detonator?" Alios shifted his weight. "Vitality's a tricky substance. Can't be that simple to blow up a factory's worth."

S lifted his head, the black visor of the helmet where his eyes should have been staring into Alios's. "I know what I'm doing, Woody."

That was the name Chief had given Alios. He scoffed at it. "You can call me Alios if you want. What's your name, S?"

"I'm Nameless."

"I meant your given name."

S ignored him. The boy never spoke much, and he kept his head down most of the time. He must have seen how the other Named soldiers looked at him. Alios for one never really cared; if you could do your job, then you were good enough. He had known too many Juliuses that might as well have been Nameless.

Alios remembered barely scraping by when he took the soldier examinations seven years ago. He had missed most of his points on stamina and firearms expertise, and he made sure to fix that. S had to take the same examinations before they let him onto the squadron, and apparently he scored

much higher than Alios did, even obtaining an S-rank. That must have been why Chief gave him that name. The other Julius soldiers must have been jealous; no soldier had ever scored an S-rank before, let alone a Nameless. Not even Captain Lydia or Captain Colton scored that high. Alios had to admit he was a little jealous.

Alios was twenty-five now, and it was his first time working with such a strange group. For the past three years he had served as a Snow Owl for Captain Lydia, who recommended him for that particular mission. Captain Lydia was always kind to him, and she even provided Chief's squadron with grapple guns before they departed.

Alios lurched forward as the boat jerked to a halt. When they slowed to a gentle cruise, Chief stood at the front, looking at each of his soldiers. "We're here at the coordinates. The Betrayers aren't gonna let us use their bathrooms, so take your shits now."

Chief seemed confident, like he believed in them, but Alios felt otherwise. They had an Aldrich who could hardly steer their boat, a Quinn with anger issues, and a Nameless boy. Sure, Alios was a Snow Owl, but hardly one of the best, and they were all led by Chief, who also happened to live like he was a Nameless through most of his life. Despite their talents, none of them had worked together before. In a way, they were expendables. Alios would show The Prospect that he was better, that he *deserved* better.

S picked his rifle off the boat floor, slinging the weapon over his shoulder. "Hope you're ready, Woody."

Alios rose to his feet. "Don't let some test scores get to your head, Nameless. I'm still older than you."

S simply nodded.

The motor purred as their boat curved along the shoreline, bordering the cliffside. Waves slapped against the edges of pointed rocks ahead, and more hidden rocks scratched the bottom of the boat as they stopped beneath a crag. It looked like a looming black mountain above him, and the occasional lightning flash would illuminate a circular tunnel halfway up the crag. It was a sewer drain, one they would use to infiltrate the factory.

Alios slung his own rifle over his shoulder. He had a pistol holstered on the right side of his belt, and a combat knife strapped onto his chest. They were all made of Fullwhite, nearly weightless on his body. Still, his knees felt weak, and he could not stop his hands from trembling.

A strong hand gripped his shoulder. Chief gave him a reassuring nod. "This your first mission, Woody?"

Alios shook his head. "I've done a few before."

“Good.” Chief looked up at the crag, admiring its stature. He signaled to Bookworm, who sat upright with nervous attention. “If we’re not back in thirty minutes, go back to base. Don’t wait on us.”

She saluted Chief, keeping her helmet low.

Being a Snow Owl, Alios was familiar with grapple guns, but the ascent without his glider, and on rainy rocks rather than snowy ones, was terrifying. After he found a lodging point, the gun pulled with great force he thought it would steal away from his grip. He clawed at wet rock surfaces to steady himself as he scaled the crag, his soaked body feeling heavier than normal.

He was the first to reach the top, and S soon followed. He could still make out Bookworm, small from the distance below. The boat floated like a buoy between rock formations, all within a vast ocean. Soon Chief and Stone reached the sewers. They patted themselves off, then aimed their weapons into the darkness of the tunnel. Alios also drew the rifle off his back, as Chief signaled them forward.

A rank, sour smell filled the interior of Alios’s helmet, enough to make him gag. Wind howled through the sewers, like an eerie shriek threatening them to retreat. Rainfall from the cliffside rumbled in a constant, thundering rhythm, while they sloshed ankle-deep in runny sewage waste. The interior was larger than he thought; the roof of the tunnel was out of his reach, and two people could pace next to each other comfortably. They did as such, with S at the front next to Chief. Stone trudged along Alios’s left side, grunting angrily with each stomp and splash he made.

“You’re making too much noise, Stone.”

“Fuck off.”

Chief shot a glance back at them. Alios stood at attention, and Stone did the same.

Rainfall grew faint as they proceeded further into the sewers. The Prospect was certain that the intelligence they received from the Clydes had entailed an intricately-designed sewer system, more akin to a maze. Soon enough, they appeared by a fork in the tunnel.

S lifted his head up to Chief. “Where to?”

S had always been too casual with Chief. Perhaps they knew each other in The Nameless City.

Chief drew a square, palm-sized tablet from his bag, and he held the tablet between the group. It flickered to life with an electronic, gridded layout. Four yellow, circular figures—their squadron—stood in the center of the grid in a green, narrow pathway. The pathway forked, but the path to the right ended abruptly. The left path continued beyond the end of the grid. Chief pointed there, then he handed the tablet to S. “That way.”

Not much further into the left fork before the rainfall fell silent. Only the eerie, wailing wind, and the sound of their boots sloshing. Occasionally, Alios felt the rumble of thunder along the tunnel walls. At least, he hoped it was thunder. On the tablet, the pathway had begun to split. Not long after, so did the tunnels ahead. The tunnelway split into multiple meandering paths, some leading to dead ends, and others in circles. Soon, the tunnel had become a labyrinth, just like the Clydes said. Alios had always been bad with directions, and he feared what would have happened were he to lose the others, but S led the way without hesitation.

Alios hurried to catch up to S's side. Their intelligence stated that there would be no one near the area, but still, he kept his voice low. "Are you sure we're heading in the right direction?"

S lifted his head. "See these rooms?" He pointed to a separate tunnel on the grid, leading to a rectangular room on the right of their circles. "Blue rooms are on the first floor, and red is higher up. We only need to worry about green."

That did not help much. The sewers continued dividing into several tunnels, all which seemed to lead in the same direction; nowhere. Even though some tunnels on the grid were blue, and others red, Alios would have been lost throughout the tunnels just on the green level. They proceeded further into the sewers, down a tunnel to the left at another fork, one to the right at a crossroad. By this point even the thunderstorm failed to reach them.

The tunnel continued for some time without any branches or forks, but then S stopped abruptly. He held the tablet up for them to see. The tunnel continued straight towards the end of the grid, but to the left of the tunnel, almost as thin as the grid lines, a green streak projected out until it disappeared out of the grid. S led the way towards the streak. "We're here."

Within Alios's helmet, a cold bead of sweat strolled down his cheek as the others quickened their pace. They had been in the tunnels for no more than ten minutes, but his chest had been tightening with anxiety. They still had to make their way back to Bookworm.

Alios would not have noticed the passageway along the left wall had S not stopped. It seemed more like a chute, wide enough for only a single person to squeeze through at a time. Chief took the tablet back, and he led the way into the chute. S went after, then Stone. Alios looked over in either direction, towards the endless darkness of either tunnelway, before following quickly behind Stone. His shoulders were too wide to squeeze through, where he had to turn his body slightly, shuffling through the corridor. The only one small enough to walk normally was S.

They shuffled along for a half-minute, when the corridor began glowing with blue light. Ahead of Alios, Chief stepped into a widened room, then the others soon followed. Alios let out a heavy exhale, one that he had been holding,

and he breathed in what felt like a fuller, cleaner breath as he gazed upon a spacious factory.

The room had widened at least twenty feet on either side, and a steel door on the farthest end. Eerie glass cylinders lined the walls, spaced evenly apart. Each of them were large enough to contain a human, but instead they held a blue liquid with a faint glow. It was ethereal.

“Never fails to amaze me.” Chief handed the tablet back to S, and he placed a hand on the nearest cylinder. “Even through the glass, you can feel the power of Vitality.”

Stone placed his hand on the glass, and Alios did the same. Against his palm, the fuel seemed to buzz, like it was waiting to burst. He pulled his hand away, in case it decided to. Terrifying.

Instead of joining in, S only stared at the Vitality cylinders. At first Alios thought he was awestruck, but S glanced down at the tablet, then at the cylinders again. “Chief, I don’t think we’re in the right place.”

Chief pulled his palm away from the glass. “Why’s that?”

S lowered his head at the tablet again. “HQ marked the location further down.”

“Who cares what HQ says?” Stone took the tablet in his hands, and he raised it high to get a better look. “This piece of shit’s probably broken.”

Chief stepped up to Stone, half of his helmed head above the rest of theirs. Quicker than Alios could blink, he swiped the tablet from Stone. “Step out of line once more and you’ll be the only piece of shit that’s broken.”

A lump formed in Alios’s throat. He had never seen Chief angry, let alone at his teammate. Even behind the masks, the air seemed to be thickening. After a silence, Stone lowered his head and receded. Then Chief returned the tablet to S. “The Vitality’s right here. You sure you’re not just being paranoid?”

For a moment S stood as still as a faceless statue, then he shook his head. “They said it was on a green level past the corridor, where the X would be. But there isn’t anything like that on the map.”

Chief glanced at the tablet again, as if the “X” would have appeared if he looked it over the third time. “It’s been fifteen minutes already, S. We need to make a decision soon. I’m leaving that to you.”

S looked at each member of the team; Chief, Stone, then Alios. He drew a shaky, muffled breath through his Fullwhite helmet, then he knelt, slinging off his backpack with the bomb equipment.

“Alright.” Chief shot a finger at Stone, then pointed back down the narrow corridor. “Make sure our exit’s secure, Stone.”

“Roger.” Stone held his rifle up, then shuffled back through the corridor in a hurry.

Alios held his own rifle close. “What should I do, Chief?”

Chief pointed back to S, who was configuring a rectangular box, no larger than two cupped hands. “Watch that door, and watch over S. I’ll go with Stone.” When Alios nodded, Chief turned back to S. “Soon as you’re done, you guys get your asses back to us.” S also nodded, and soon Chief had already disappeared down the corridor.

S continued tinkering with the box, pressing several buttons that lined the sides and the metal frames. Several colored wires protruded from either corner, a strange sort of bomb that Alios had never seen before. A minute passed before S snapped the box together, and it let out a quiet *beep*. S rose to his feet, clutching the bomb primer close to himself. His hands were trembling. He stood before the first cylinder, unsure of where to place the primer.

“What’s wrong, S?” Alios leaned close to him.

S lifted his head at the cylinder. “I don’t see any tubes connecting this tank to anything else.”

Alios had no idea what S was talking about, but he had less knowledge of Vitality than a Julius should. “What does that mean?”

S traced the grated floor of the factory room, nothing but bits of residual waste along the edges near the walls. “It means if I blow this thing up, it’ll be the only one that explodes.”

Alios looked at the Vitality cylinder. It seemed ready, *felt* ready to detonate even with the slightest touch. “What?”

S clicked his tongue in annoyance. “When this tank blows up, it’ll destroy the entire room, probably a lot more. The other tanks will break too, but the Vitality from those won’t even catch fire because they weren’t connected at the time of ignition. The Vitality from the other tanks will probably just splatter over the floor.”

Alios was completely lost. “How does that even work? Shouldn’t it all just catch fire like Old World fuel?”

S shook his head. “Vitality doesn’t work like that. It’s too stable. The only way for it all to explode is if it’s all connected in the same pool. If this canister connects through the entire factory, then yeah, I can blow it up. But . . .” S made his way around the cylinder, taking another closer look. “But these don’t look like they’re connected to anything. More like they’re just sitting around in storage.”

“S, if what you’re saying is true . . .” Alios’s stomach sank, and his chest pounded. “. . . Then we’re in the wrong place.”

S looked over his shoulder, back at Alios. “We are.”

A cold chill ran through Alios’s spine. He glanced back down the narrow corridor, where Chief and Stone had disappeared through. “W—we have to tell Chief.”

S had already begun unzipping his bag of equipment. He tossed the primer back into his bag, and he slung it over his shoulder. "You go on back."

"S." Alios grabbed him by the arm. "This mission is done. The Betrayers are going to be here any minute."

S pulled his arm free. "It's done when I finish it. I made a promise."

"So did *I*." Alios stood his ground. "I promised my mother that I would be the one to end the war. I'm sure you said something like that to someone else too, but this is *done*. They'd want us to be alive. Not two dead soldiers who *also* failed their mission."

Only a moment had passed, one that felt like forever with a shortening timer. S lowered his bag, but from it he fetched the primer. "The door ahead leads to a red room. I think it's a staircase, and there's probably another one on the other side. I won't go much further than that." He drew the tablet from his pocket, before nodding at Alios. "Get Chief. I'll be back here before you guys are."

"S!"

Leaving his bag and rifle, S darted to the steel door. Alios cursed under his breath. The boy was fast; he would never catch him with his gear on. He ran back through the narrow corridor, not wasting a moment to find Chief.

The armor on his shoulders and elbows scraped against concrete walls as he hurried back down the corridor. How many minutes had passed since they found the Vitality? Five? Ten? Regardless, they may have to run back before Bookworm left them. Before The Betrayers found them. At the end of the corridor, Chief was crouching in the tunnel, holding his gun before him. "Chief!"

Without looking, Chief raised his hand. *Silence*, he had ordered. Alios stopped in his tracks, just before the end of the corridor. Chief looked back over his shoulder, where Stone had crouched along the other side of the tunnel, gun aimed in the other direction. Chief waved for Alios's attention, and he pointed to the side of his helmet by his ear. *Listen*.

Alios held his breath, another shiver running up his spine all the way through to his neck. Far in the empty, wailing tunnels, a gentle splash had been echoing, growing louder with each step, getting closer.

Stone shuffled over to Chief, as silent as he could for once. But still his steps left ripples through the sewage water. "It's a fucking trap, Chief. The damned Clydes set us up."

Chief lowered his head, accepting what was to come. "You have your orders, soldier." Chief turned his attention to Alios. "And so do you. S is the only one who matters in this mission."

The echoing splashes grew louder, faster. They had caught wind of Alios and them. They were coming.

"Chief!" Stone raised his rifle. "They're here!"

The tunnel flashed in several instantaneous bright lights, all from the barrel of Stone's rifle. Gunshots blasted Alios's eardrums as Stone fired into the darkness in the direction they came from, where the splashes were coming from. Chief whirled around and fired in the same direction, sharp *whizzes* flying by their ears. "Go, Woody!"

Alios did not look back. He shuffled as quickly as he could back down the corridor, back to S, while the gunshots echoed behind him. Once he made it back to the Vitality cylinders, he scooped up S's rifle and gear.

S was right after all. Just past the steel door, the next room opened into a winding metal staircase, upwards to the next floor. Alios hurried up the stairs. Even though his gear was light, exhaustion already began setting into his body. The gunshots were still echoing behind him, and the staircase wound up an entire loop before he reached the next door. He pushed through into a long metal hallway, nothing there but another steel door on the far side. Alios ran through the hallway as fast as he could, drawing heavy breaths. He was in decent shape; why was he so tired?

He swung the door open, where another staircase spiraled downward. Alios leapt over some steps, hurrying his way down. Another door had been fixed to the opposite side. He pushed through, where he was greeted with blinding blue light.

Alios reeled from the light, shutting his eyes. He slapped a button on the left side of his helmet and turned off the night vision, squinting into the room. When his eyes adjusted, it was larger than he imagined, nearly the size of an auditorium. Were they truly still underground?

The true factory contained the bulk of the Vitality; several cylinders, the same size as the ones in the storage room, lined the edges of the factory. Dozens—no—hundreds more. Directly in the center, another, larger cylinder hummed with energy.

The hum was loud, like a heavy, whirring fan, and Alios's hairs rose from beneath his armor. The larger cylinder stood fifty feet tall, and was just as wide. It pulsed with the same blue energy, with a metal base that had several pipes funneling the Vitality through to the smaller cylinders, and into chutes along the walls and up to the ceiling. It was the heart of the factory, enough energy to supply the entire city of Summerheart for an eternity. That was also where they would finally win the war.

Alios stepped into the room, down four steps of a smaller staircase. S was not by the foot of the larger cylinder, where he expected, but was instead in a corner to the right, behind a normal-sized cylinder. S had already fixed the primer in an obscure location, hidden under one of the many tubes sprawled about. Alios hurried over to his side. "Why're you doing it in this corner?"

S pressed a few buttons, starting the bomb timer. “Doesn’t matter where I put it. It’ll blow up the same since they’re all connected, like I said.” S stood up, placing the tablet in his pocket. He took his rifle and bag from Alios. “And they won’t think to look in a hidden place for a bomb they don’t even know about.”

Alios dreaded to tell S, but he did not want to go back. “S, they know we’re here already.”

S froze. “How?”

Alios shook his head. “Chief and Stone are fighting them back right now. We have to help them.”

“Right.” S threw the bag over his shoulder, and he raised his rifle. “Let’s hope they—”

A *bang* echoed throughout the factory. S clutched his stomach. He looked downward, before collapsing to his knees with a weak groan.

“S!” Alios ducked behind the cylinder with S, as a bullet *whizzed* by his ear. He moved S’s hands away from his stomach, where blood had already soaked into his gloves. “Shit, S!”

Fullwhite armor was the strongest there was. No Lost World metal could penetrate its shell. But Alios heard some Clydes had been experimenting with new metals that could pierce through Fullwhite if hit directly. The Betrayers must have stolen it from them, the same way they stole Vitality from The Prospect.

Bullets peppered the walls, *whizzing* and punching through concrete. S growled, peeking behind the cylinder, then he clutched Alios’s arm. “There’s three of them. I’ll take the closest one.”

Alios looked between the rifle in his hands and S. The boy had dropped his rifle back in the open, but he held a pistol that he had drawn off his belt. Alios gave a shaky nod, then he leapt from around the corner.

As Alios moved from behind the cylinder, a bullet grazed his left temple, before deflecting to the wall behind him. Alios raised the scope of the rifle to his eye. Three Betrayers stood by the railing of another door to the far right corner. They did not have armor; not Fullwhite, at least. Alios aimed at his attacker. Once the sights lined with the Betrayer’s head, he fired.

The butt of the gun punched Alios’s shoulder, and the loud *bang* echoed in his right ear. It was stronger than Lost World guns, and the barrel had been aimed at the ceiling when he regained his footing. Several *bangs* from other guns went off, a few bullets *whizzing* next to Alios. He aimed his rifle again. The other two Betrayers had fallen already—S had killed the other—so he aimed down the scope at the third Betrayer and fired again.

Blinking away sweat, Alios lowered his gun as the last Betrayer fell. He hurried back to S, who had already dropped his pistol, wheezing in pain. “Let’s

hurry back. Easy now.” Alios pulled S to his feet, throwing the boy’s arm over his shoulder. “How much time do we have?”

S grunted as they climbed the steps back to the stairwell. “Set it for five minutes. Probably four left.”

“Then I guess we better hurry.” Alios slung the rifle over his shoulder and crouched before S, who leapt onto his back. He carried S up the winding staircase, and back down the long hallway. Once they reached the end, another shower of bullets whizzed by them from behind. S grunted as a few deflected off his back.

Alios ducked behind the doorway, and he hurried down the stairwell. He had only reached halfway down when the Betrayers chasing them charged into the room. The first Betrayer raised a large rifle, aimed directly at Alios’s head.

Alios squeezed his eyes shut, before two gunshots blasted by his ears. His ears rang as S’s weight crashed into him, and they tumbled down the rest of the steps. The impact did not hurt, but his brain bounced around in his skull until he finally crashed face-first into the concrete. Alios shook his head, ears still ringing as he looked back up the stairwell. The Betrayer chasing them was face-down, already dead.

S was lying next to Alios. His body had stilled, and the left side of his head was red with blood.

“ . . . S?”

Alios reached for S, sighing with relief as the boy shifted his weight, rubbing the place where he had been shot. “Must’ve just grazed you. Come on.”

S nodded, and he crawled to his feet. They stumbled into the Vitality storage, and Alios slammed the door shut behind him while shouts and steps entered the stairwell from above.

S clutched at his stomach, hurrying to the narrow corridor. He stopped, letting Alios go first, but Alios pushed him through. “You’re skinnier than me. I’ll watch your back.” Alios drew the pistol off his belt, shuffling behind S.

They were only halfway down the corridor when the Betrayers made it into the storage room. Alios raised his pistol. As soon as the door swung open he fired into the darkness. He did not wait to see a Betrayer, and he hardly aimed. He only prayed that his bullets found a target. The Betrayers fired back, but to his luck no bullets found him either.

S had pushed through into the tunnels, and he pulled Alios out of the line of fire. They both collapsed into sewage water, and Alios climbed to his feet. He had just reached a hand out to S when someone punched his chest. Alios dropped his pistol. He buckled away, keeping himself upright against the tunnel wall. No one was close to him. Just S reaching for the pistol Alios had dropped, and two Betrayers down the sewer tunnel, both aiming their rifles at Alios.

Alios looked down.

At the center of his chest, a pool of red had begun to form. It began spilling over his Fullwhite armor. He did not feel any pain. He lifted his head back to the Betrayers, as they fired at him again.

Two more punches, one to Alios's stomach, and another through his heart.

Alios fell onto his back, and cold sewage water embraced him. Then the pain finally set in. He heard there was no pain, but his body was burning. His face flushed and his mind was overcome with a wave of nausea. The gunshot wounds were searing, overwhelming, and they were wet and sticky with blood. He held his hands over his stomach and his chest. He could not feel his pulse.

Several distant, dull gunshots flew over him. He rested his head in the sewage. Disgusting, sure, but the exhaustion had been setting in his body, and the water was warm. It was comforting.

Gunfire died down, and S knelt over him. The boy pressed his hands against Alios's chest, but Alios could not feel anything through the numbness that had set in. S pried at the straps beneath his helmet, then he drew it off his head.

Short, light-brown hair, with eyes of the same shade. In S's file he had a scowl, but there he seemed like a normal kid. Alios had forgotten that S was no older than sixteen. S still had the red scarf wrapped around his left arm; Alios had also forgotten that he was Nameless.

Another figure stood above Alios. He did not wear his helmet either, but he was handsome, with clean brown hair and a gentle face; Chief. *Where was Stone?* Chief had always seemed so confident. But there, he was terrified.

I'm dying.

Chief grabbed S by the arm. S fought, but to no avail as Chief pulled him along. "Roth, we have to save him!"

"There's nothing we can do for him."

"Alios is still alive!"

Alios chuckled; S called him by his real name. As the pain nulled, he began to hear normally again. The Betrayers splashed from down the corridor, and they would be there any moment. S and Chief stopped fighting, as Alios lifted a hand. "Go on, Nameless. Show The Prospect that you are better than them."

S had already begun to tear up; he *was* just a boy. Both he and Chief threw on their helmets, and Chief returned a nod to Alios. "You did your duty, soldier."

He picked up S, throwing him over his shoulder. Soon they were gone.

Betrayers ran past, not paying any mind as they sloshed warm water over him. The comfort of its heat was fleeting, as he stiffened from the coldness within his own body. *Would Mother be proud?* Alios's vision began to blur, and he grew sleepy. But that nor the cold mattered to Alios.

Because that was the night that S would end the war.