

The Awakening

I've been with my father since before he left Fundament's orbit. I didn't know myself outside or apart from him: For billions of years, we were one. We moved from one despondent and underdeveloped civilization to the next throughout the universe, offering guidance and prestige and adapting to each misalignment before our eventual departures. There was remorse in abandoning those we settled with, but they were never wholly in the dark regarding our priorities and trepidations. That's what made the exchange so easy for all parties involved: Transparency, assurance, and encouragement were all it took to give societies and cultures the key to utopism.

That is until we aligned amongst Fundament's 52 moons.

When we elected to enhance the cephalopod species, we watched as knowledge and order spiraled into power and greed. Previous species would have similar outcomes, but this quickly developed into something that no longer bore safety to us. As if to counter how bright the light in our grey heart shone, the darkness slithered into the hearts and minds of those it knew would wield it best. So, after the children of the Osmium King evolved after being tainted by the planet's worm gods, we knew it was time to go. Soon after Zavathun and Shivarath left Fundament with their hoards and moons, we did the same. But nothing evaded Oryx, and he knew that we, as "The Great Machine," could not be out of his grasp.

We barreled through the cosmos. Each civilization we advanced faced the wrath of Oryx and the darkness. The Eliksni, Harmony, Amonite, Equmine...all invaded and nearly left desolate, and I was there for it all. Even long after my father was dormant after the Dark Age, I was always there. When my father delivered a portion of his light to Ghosts with his last breath, assigning humanity the task of protecting and preserving themselves in his absence, he also began to form what would become me. It wasn't so much an egg or the chicken debate, but one that would spark how he managed to separate himself from himself to create me.

What keeps me connected to him clarifies that his decision wasn't to dispel what he deemed to be flawed. But instead, to preserve what had gathered over time and blossomed into something worth preserving: His paracausal version of humanity. I was formed by the fear he developed after leaving Fundament; the essence of using energy – which can never be created nor destroyed – to develop other moons, satellites, and inhabitable planets; the benevolence he had to protect and nurture the societies he constructed; and the dedication to not abandon Earth. The complexities of such feelings have materialized in the past, but never to this depth. And, since father was retreating into a dormant state, it only made sense to preserve those emotions if not for future investigation.

That's when I came about. I was pushed into Earth long after the Ghosts were disbursed, who well-occupied the human's attention with their ability to regift life in their unique way. So, I was left to my own discovery and devices. I awoke on a shoreline surrounded by warm sand with a gentle breeze blowing the nearby tree leaves. When I rose to stand, it was as if my body already knew what limbs served what purpose and how my organism allowed me to see from a perspective separate from my father. I looked down at my vessel and saw how my form mimicked that of a bipedal creature –specifically, a human. Although, in place of skin was the same terra-mechanical material that my father was made of. Smooth, nearly porcelain white material encased my frame in the shape of arms, torso, legs, and appendages. The cyber-optic light from my eyes glowed a pale pink color, and the same hue lit up when my jaw mechanics moved with each utterance I spoke. When I placed a hand against my chest, I could only assume the sensation was what humans would call warmth, but it was from my father's Light rather than the electrical pulses that give humans life.

Birds calling to each other in the sky brought me back to my surroundings. I looked up to see the vast body of water rolling over the sand before crawling back out, revealing a crab transferring from one shell to another. The sound of weapons shucking around me caused me to look and see that I was surrounded by four humans, Guardians, to be exact. I knew because of their Ghosts that analyzed me while speaking amongst each other and their owners. I dared not move, for the fragility of human trust in other beings is slim to none, and I did not want to appear as a threat. The Ghosts spoke about how I did have Light, and a vague familiarity they couldn't decipher was friend or foe. It made sense they recognized me – we could be considered extraterrestrial siblings.

One of the Guardians barked a brief introduction and demanded I identify myself. While I thought of how to respond without causing a stir, another Guardian spoke up, telling me they saw I descended from the Traveler and projected my coordinates to find me here. The male Guardian seemed annoyed that the woman gave me an explanation and demanded I identify myself.

"I am...Asteria. A Child of the Traveler." Everyone's grip on their guns sagged as they looked from me to one another. "Where your Ghosts are his Light," I continued, drawing their attention back to me, "I am his paracausality."

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"ria...teria...Asteria!" Natasha-4 yelled. The ringing in Asteria's ears drowned out the booms and firearms sounding in the background. She opened her eyes to meet the greenish-

grey sky of the Black Garden. She turned to see Maddison-3 and Natasha on either side of her, shooting at Vex Goblins, with Luke-3 occasionally soaring in the air to shoot at the few enemies that remained at the black heart's prayer grounds.

"How long was I out? Are these the last of the Vex?" Asteria asked.

"Yeah, we're handling them," Maddison said. "But after the Black Garden's heart was destroyed, you knocked out. What happened?"

Asteria shook her head and rubbed the back of her neck. She felt like she'd slept on a brick mattress for years. She knew she must've had a vision because of how confused she was but couldn't recall what it was about. She looked up at the metal encasing that held the heart of the Black Garden, but it didn't seem to bring any memories of what happened while she was out. "I don't know. I feel strange, though."

"Does that mean you have more knowledge about the Traveler?" Natasha inquired.

"No, nothing..." Asteria claimed.

"Well, the people of The City only keep you around because you're something significant from the Traveler," Luke-3 stated as he landed on the ground next to them. "You'd better start rememberin' somethin' because I don't know if I can keep protecting you—" Natasha rolls her eyes and swats Luke upside the head.

"Please ignore him," Lola-2 said. "We all know how much the people of The City value the Traveler, so we inherently value you, too." Lola scanned the area one last time before turning to face the group. "You fought well today. You'll be as ferocious as the Vanguard in no time."

"Thanks, captain," Asteria said with a smile before glancing over at Luke, then her attention moved to Natasha, who had a pained look on her face. "Why haven't you let your Ghost heal you already?" she asked.

Natasha shook her head and said it wasn't worth moaning about, but Asteria shook her head and flipped Natasha's palm over, exposing the bloody and pussy blisters to the dusty air. "They're from gripping my gun. I'll be fine."

"Yeah, you just have to suck *less* and shoot *more!*" Luke said, laughing obnoxiously enough to snort at each inhale. Maddison clonked him over the head again and pulled him off to the side for one of their "pep talks."

The banter of her team can undoubtedly be insufferable at times, but it's also charming to be treated as an equal. When they return to The City, Asteria tends to be pulled in every direction because she's a child of the Traveler. If you could call fighting off swarms of Vex through alternate timelines a vacation of sorts, Asteria couldn't agree more.

The Warmind

Significant time has passed, and all that the Traveler had been physically subjected to was reflected on Asteria's body. Her once smooth, almost ceramic terra-mechanical frame was now covered in cracked and wispy hues of teal, green, and blue light. Fortunately, after Ghaul had invaded The City, the Traveler's suffering when in the Cabal's cage hadn't transferred to Asteria. But an unfortunate result of Ghaul's attack was a riot outbreak at the Prison of Elders that needed immediate attention, or the Red War invasion was going to be one of many worries. This was a mission where Petra Venj requested Cayde-6's assistance. And it was under his advisement that he and Petra be accompanied by his favorite Guardian: Asteria.

She was both honored and ready for the fight. Cayde was almost like a brother to her, but their connection felt more paternal, so it only made sense that she referred to him as her uncle from another struggle. When she'd first told him this, he made Sundance dance with him because he loved her like a sister/daughter, so he couldn't agree more that she referred to him as her uncle. It was a little awkward, but the genuine connection that Cayde made with her could withstand the test of time. Plus, this was Asteria's first mission without her usual team, Natasha, Maddison, Lola, and Luke, so now more than ever would be the perfect time for Cayde to see just how much Asteria's earned the informal title of The City's princess.

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To most, the prison would've been impossible to regain control of with the fights, broken architecture, fires, and the sense that the whole structure would collapse at any given moment. Asteria could hear the shouts and screams of inmates and the Chosen down tattered corridors. Cayde said something snarky as he whipped Ace out of its holster, to which Petra took her weapon stance, and Asteria rose to hover nearly a foot off the ground. Her eyes glowed brighter than usual as she twisted her open palms to face their starting direction, the hum of Ark-light danced between her fingertips.

The team maneuvered swiftly through the entrance of the gate. They were surrounded by walls, blocks, and crumbled cement, with fungus and what looked to be barnacles growing anywhere a shadow was cast. Petra and Cayde's boots echoed as they walked into a corridor that wrapped around like a labyrinth. Stone, broken metal, small fires, and walkways led down into a foyer. The dim light from the flames cast long shadows along the ground, making it harder to know what may be around each corner.

Petra lifted her fist to halt her team, then gestured down into the foyer, where several Chosen Acolytes lurked amongst each other. Petra and Cayde raised their guns, but Asteria

tensed her shoulders and lifted her open palms to chest level. On Petra's queue, the Guardians bounded down the steep stone steps to ambush the pale, snarling enemies. Ark-light spheres phased around Asteria's hands, and with each push of her palm, she shot them down at the Chosen swarm. She rose higher into the air to provide the group with better aerial support and to ensure she wouldn't miss and hit a teammate.

If Luke found out she shot friendly fire, he wouldn't let her hear the end of it. Plus, she had an image to uphold.

The Chosen Acolytes growled and clambered up to only be shot down by Petra and Cayde. For the few that tried to scale the walls or leap from stones and protruding metal, Asteria greeted them with the same fate. The sounds of gunshots and crashing mana rang throughout the space, and Petra grunted when she got bit in the shoulder by an ogre. Cayde shot it off her body and was by her side in an instant, shooting at the enemies while pulling Petra behind a pillar. He then jumped high in the air to where he was almost right next to Asteria, then slowly descended as Light shone from around his back. His gun never seemed to run out of ammo as he and Asteria pushed the ogres and acolytes through a walkway to buy Petra time. But they're quickly met with a tall, stalking Chosen wizard. It shot out purple darkness at the team from its taloned fingers, so they scattered before the bulbs hit the ground like a grenade.

With each fallen enemy, Cayde taunted the Chosen, calling them "Chosen Trash" and "ugly raptors," but the Chosen paid him no mind as they continued trying to defend their territory. The team didn't have to wonder which direction the riot stemmed from because the Chosen all seemed to be coming from the same direction, so they fought with the enemies leading the way. Asteria stayed in the air with Cayde occasionally buzzing around her, and Petra led from the right flank whenever it was optimal to push forward. Whenever one team member had to move, another would take their place to ensure their formation never had holes.

Everyone was accountable for each other.

Asteria continued her aerial attacks, hurling blazing shapes of varying sizes and Ark artillery at the Chosen when Petra was bit again. Asteria called for Cayde, and he knew it was his turn to be in the air while Asteria helped on the ground. They're a smaller group, so it's hard to have time to heal as needed, but they planned while on the journey to the Reef for when Asteria needed to use her Solar-light. Fortunately for them, Asteria no longer needed to physically touch the wounded area to heal it: She held out one of her hands, the blue, Ark-light sphere changed into a hollow orange circle, before shooting out a Solar ray. When the ray landed on Petra's shoulder, Asteria's voice rang out a G-major seventh chord, and the wound began to heal relatively quickly. The bone and sinew reconnected before muscles, tendons, and

ligaments fused back together. Then fresh skin rippled over the exposed area, and any cotton fabric from Petra's clothes laced back together.

"Incredible," Petra said breathlessly.

"Told you it'd be worth it if she tagged along!" Cayde shouted just as he descended on top of a pillar, never turning away from the Chosen thralls below. Asteria smiled before hoisting Petra back up to her feet and returning into the air just as an enemy came bolting from around a corner. She shot the creature right back through where it came from with Ark-light when the sound of guns and machinery ceased and only the sound of them panting echoed off the stone walls around them. The group checked that the area was clear before they continued hustling through the prison.

Unsurprisingly, just as the three of them locked down the prison, Asteria sensed that massive organisms were fleeing to the base of the prison. She called out to Petra and Cayde, and Petra was the one who decided she and Asteria would go check the prison cells down in the hull. Cayde decided he would keep guard at the prison's network hub if someone were to disable it again. Asteria directed Petra to run to the edge of the hub so she could transport them down quickly. Petra obliged, and the two leaped over the edge, Asteria floating down on her own while encasing Petra in a controlled Solar sphere.

"You're a rockstar, kid!" Cayde called down.

When she and Petra landed, Asteria stayed at the broken entrance while Petra went in to examine the cells of the Scorn Barons. She quickly realized it was them who managed to escape their cells and fled to the lower levels of the base. The two ran to the edge of the cell entrance and shouted up to Cayde, to which Asteria offered to transport the three of them down safely with her Solar light. But Cayde had another plan in mind.

Asteria and Petra watched as he jumped on the prison's network hub and shot its suspensions that kept it in mid-air. He grabbed rubber tubing and held on as if holding the reins of a flaming bull rampaging into the depths of Hell. Asteria laughed aloud at his spontaneity, the flaming hub falling through the hull past them, and Cayde saluted to them with Petra's mouth agape. The showy pursuit managed to cut off the Scorn, but it left Asteria and Petra separated from Cayde. Through her laughter, Asteria put another Solar sphere around Petra in anticipation of just gliding down, but Petra declined the method. Instead, Petra advised that the two of them walk down to try and help with the backend of any potential ambush.

Asteria's brows furrowed because she felt it'd be most efficient if they all stayed together, but Petra was the one who allowed her to be invited on this mission. It'd be ill of Asteria to try to stand around and bicker while they had a Guardian riding solo amongst high-

level inmates. So, Asteria nodded and retracted her Solar light before she and Petra took off running.

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As Asteria and Petra ran, shooting and blasting any Chosen they came across, a wall of light pushed through the walls, surrounding the two of them for a moment before passing into the opposite wall. The two paused, then their eyes snapped to look at each other before they pushed onward with all the force they could muster as a 2-woman squad. That wasn't just any light because it couldn't have been from a normal blast or a Guardian – it was a Ghost.

Cayde was alone, and he'd lost Sundance.

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Petra was the first who ran around the corner. Before she saw Cayde on the floor, she saw the Scorn Baron standing on the other side of a gate with a hooded figure in front of them. That had to be the mastermind who organized this ordeal in the Reef's prison. Asteria nearly ran into her when she came into the area. The first thing her eyes laid on was Cayde's body on the ground next to his shattered Ghost. Without regard for who was mere feet from her uncle's body, Asteria flew over to him with a gust of wind and knelt by his side. She wanted to pick him up, but she feared that moving him in any manner would cause him to shut down, so all she could do was choke out his name.

"He didn't feel a thing."

Asteria looked up into the yellow eyes that belonged to the voice now chuckling down at her and Cayde. Petra raised her weapon to shoot the shrouded figure, but Asteria let out a burst of Void-light that caused Petra to fall to the floor as hanging metal creaked in protest and unsettled structures toppled over in a cloud of dust. She screamed at the man and raised her hand, multiple Void spheres phasing rapidly into view before she shot them directly at him and the Baron. The door snapped shut just as the spheres crashed into it and the surrounding wall, causing the metal to dent and warp, but not enough to push it from its hinges.

"How's...How's my hair?" Cayde asked. Asteria looked down at him with what would've been tears flowing down her cheeks, but instead was her terra-mechanical face cracking with more streaks of teal, green, and blue light. She couldn't register the question until he coughed again. "Speechless. Typical."

Petra was now beside the two of them, and her Ghost appeared, giving a status report of Cayde's condition. Asteria doesn't wait for it to continue its analysis before she immediately

moved her hand that glimmered with Solar light over his chest to begin healing, but nothing happened. Asteria's dumbfounded: She's never not been able to heal someone at least a little bit, so what could be wrong. Petra's Ghost confirmed that it, too, cannot heal Cayde, and Asteria can't help but wonder if it's because his body is a non-biological organism.

Unlike the Traveler, she cannot give Light to mechanical species.

"Listen, kid... This ain't on you," Cayde said. It was almost as if he was responding to her exact thoughts. She knew what he said was true, but she'd always managed to come through as the last hope. Asteria couldn't understand how this situation had never happened before with Lola's team, or else she would've been better prepared to help one of the most influential people in her life. But her thoughts were interrupted when Cayde continued to cough.

"You tell Zavala and Ikora...the Vanguard...this is the best bet...I ever...lost...."

The lack of mechanical voice and struggled breathing made the silence even harder to bear. Petra's shallow breaths sputtered as she turned away. Asteria couldn't muster the strength to move a finger. She looked at Cayde's lightless eye sockets as if suddenly they'd turn back on, and he'd joke about them getting too soft on him. But no, this wasn't the case.

Not this time.

Asteria stared off as she felt her body heat up again. She could sense that her usually stiff hair was moving and swaying, separating, and curling into tendrils of energy and Light. She felt her palms heat up with Void-light, and her eyes burned as her pale pink lights shone brighter. The seething hatred for whomever it was that dared taunt Cayde's condition before his last breaths boiled within her. She noticed the weight and cold metal of Cayde's mechanical arm pressed into her knee as if still trying to reassure her from the afterlife that this wasn't her fault. Even more so, she knew Cayde wouldn't want the darkness to consume what made her unique in this world. So, Asteria silently vowed to her dear friend, the Guardians, the Vanguard, and the entire human race that she would be the catalyst to protect the Light and embolden all who bear it to bring peace to their system.